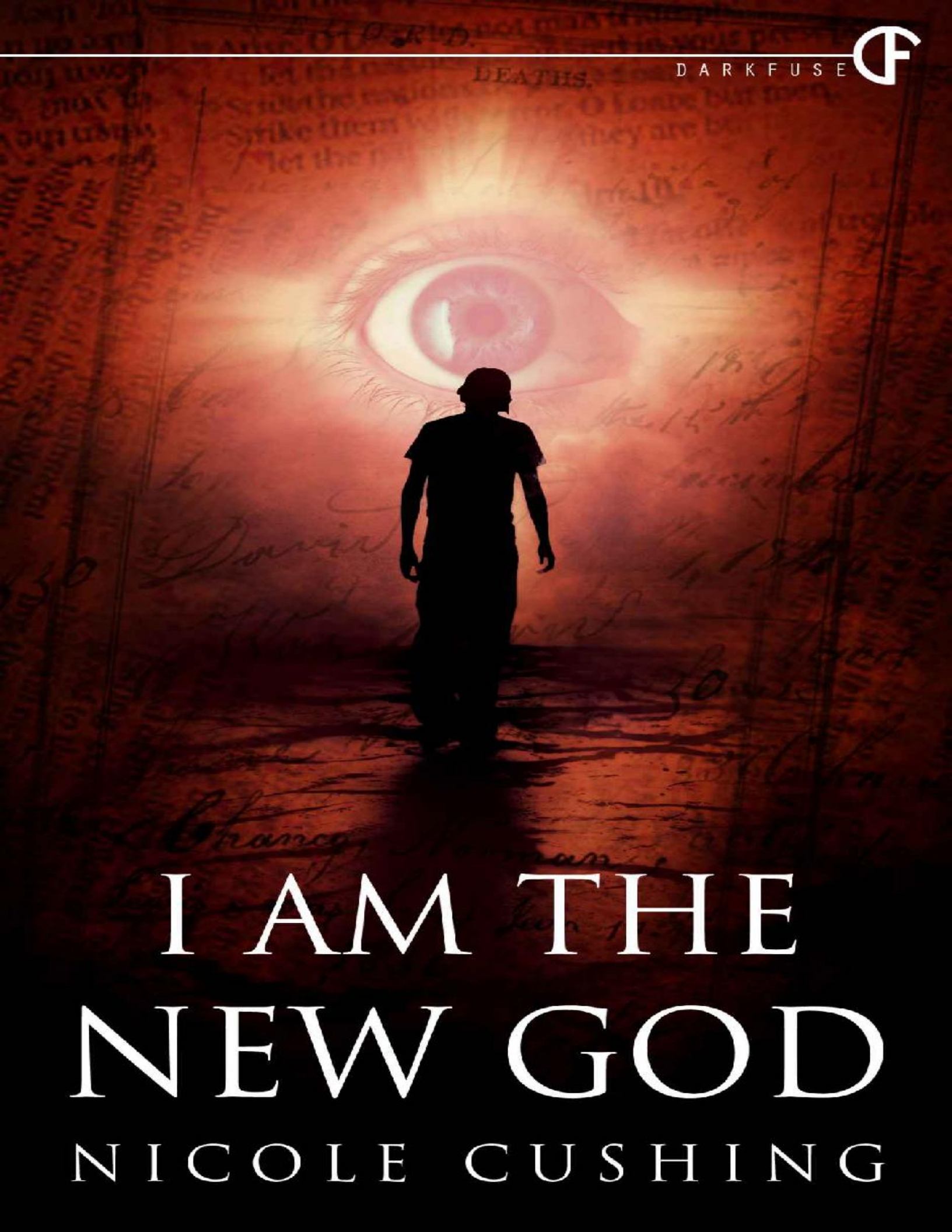
DARKFUSE
I AM THE NEW GOD
NICOLE CUSHING

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I AM THE NEW GOD

Nicole Cushing

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To my husband

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“As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be.”

—Mormon leader Lorenzo Snow, 1837

“Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss.”

—The Who

The Correspondence

The hierophant never made phone calls. He wrote letters. They were written in calligraphy on notebook paper. The first came about a week after orientation. I'd just transferred out of a community college in my tiny hometown and moved into Winchester Hall men's dorm at St. Edward's College (about three hours away).

In the first letter (postmarked September 9, 1989), he groveled in a manner I can only describe as obsequious. "I regret I couldn't contact You sooner, but the ones You call 'mother' and 'father' would have intercepted these communications had I not waited until the appointed time. Please forgive Thy most humble servant for any delay in Your apotheosis."

I didn't write back to him, at first. Had St. Edward's been a traditional college, I would have suspected the letters were fraternity pranks. But it was a "public honors college." State-funded, but with a certain snooty affectation. The closest thing we had to a fraternity was the lacrosse team, and I don't think they knew I existed. Besides, the letters had been postmarked in someplace called New Harmony, Indiana. St. Edward's was nestled on an isolated peninsula in southern Maryland, along the Chesapeake Bay. Whoever wrote them couldn't have known me. And yet, it seemed she (or, I suspected, more likely, *he*) did.

Each week (sometimes twice a week), the letters came. Sometimes, the envelopes arrived stained with coffee. Other times, the envelopes looked stained with blood. Sometimes, my name and address had been typed. Other times, they had been hastily scrawled in blue ink. Sometimes, the envelope was crisp and pristine. Other times, the envelope had been crinkled and folded and nearly torn apart before it had even gotten into my hands.

“I know You are to become a wrathful god, but also not a god without mercy. I beseech Thee to answer my pleas. I beg Thee not to tarry with indifference. If You watch the news, You already know how much the world needs You.”

I kept the letters. They entertained me, and I damn sure *needed* to be entertained. My roommate was a Japanese misfit named Arihiro Takahashi. His English was only so/so. Most of the time, he had his nose deep in a physics book. The rest of the time, he smoked weed. His favorite English phrase was: “That sucks.” His next favorite phrase was: “That sucks so bad.” He only managed to mutter these words after having a few hits off a joint, and he offered no clarification about exactly *what* sucked. In spite of the language barrier and mutual lack of interest in getting to know each other, we tried hanging out together. We sat among the cinder block walls, listening to Kitaro and smoking dope because we both knew that (as young men new to dorm life) we were obligated to indulge ourselves.

I took four classes that first semester—English Literature, Math 100, American History after the Civil War, and Psychology 101. St. Edward’s had a fine reputation, but I found most of the coursework easy. This wasn’t good news. I’d hoped to be able to wile away most of the time studying. I didn’t want to mix among my peers. The other guys in the dorm (besides Arihiro) only wanted to play video games or watch porn tapes. If anything, the girls were worse. They disgusted me with their overrevealing, late-summer outfits. Clumsy, fatty cleavage jostled about in ill-fitting tops. They wanted nothing more than for me to ogle them. By casting my eye to the ground whenever I passed them, I won. They weren’t going to snare me. They weren’t even going to snare a three-second glance from me.

The campus was lousy with hormones. Even though I, myself, was never aroused, I could sense the arousal among all the rest of them. I could smell it. The odor was like sweat and perfume and cum and snatch and it made me want to retch.

So I came up with a little trick to help me deal with walking everyday amidst a group of people who disgusted me. I nurtured the belief that I was above the fray and, somehow, out of time. I began to pretend that none of what I was experiencing was real. Like my body wasn’t really my body, and like I wasn’t really *in it*. That’s how I got through it all. I tried to imagine my life was just a book or a movie and I wasn’t in it. I tried to imagine I was on the outside of my life, looking in.

That made things easier.

The other thing that made things easier was mailing a letter back to the hierophant.

* * *

For the first few weeks, the future god didn't reply to my pleas. Some might claim I was too fervent at the start. I should've, perhaps, began with a timid request that He hear me out, to brace Himself to hear things He might find strange. He may have replied to me sooner if I'd taken the time to prepare Him for how unusual it all might sound. Instead, though, I plunged right in and just laid it all out for Him. I thought it pointless to beat around the bush.

The first letter He wrote back looked so official in nature that when I first dug it out of my mailbox, I assumed it was a bill. The envelope was crisp and clean and just so. The letter had been generated on a near-letter quality dot-matrix printer. No running ink. No misspellings. The signature at the bottom was, perhaps, not as legible as I'd expect from one who would soon be a deity. It was a tiny pictograph of loops and squiggles, hurriedly written, wrestling with one another like jumbled coat hangers.

Yet I felt certain He was the one. I'd spent thousands of dollars on fortune tellers, all of whom were in agreement the new god would be born in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. I'd spent a small fortune on road trips. I must have spent a full ten percent of my inheritance that way, driving from poky little town to sprawling suburb to major metropolis. When I couldn't keep watch over Him, I hired private investigators to do it for me. I can't say quite *how* I came to the determination that Greg Bryce was to become the new god. It wasn't an intellectual process at all. It was a spiritual and intuitive one. I simply knew a new god when I saw one. I first spotted Him standing by the curb one morning while waiting for the school bus. He stood off to the side, by Himself—not having anything to do with the other children. He had a distant look in His eyes, as though it pained Him to breathe the same air as the others. This seemed quite congruent with the Being who had spoken to me in dreams (the god who announced His time was nigh).

The Being in Dreams was aloof, but rightly so. I kept that in mind when I waited for a reply to my letters. Who was I to dare communicate with one

so exalted? Perhaps He felt my overtures too forward. Or perhaps it was more simple than that. Perhaps He already sensed, intuitively, that He was a god and checking the mailbox was beneath Him. Or perhaps He had already established a telepathic connection to other realms; planets more vibrant than the one He'd been plopped onto. Perhaps He silently communicated with an audience of creatures at a greater level of spiritual evolution. Creatures closer to godhood than humans were.

Whatever the reason for His distance, I knew He couldn't be counted on to exist fully on this material plane. It was as though He lived with one foot on land, and another in heaven.

He existed in this incarnation as a man, but did not have the needs a man has. Greg Bryce *did* eat regularly. I know that from my observations, as well as those of the private investigator. I can only presume this was for the benefit of His so-called "mother" and "father." If He'd attempted to go without food altogether, before His apotheosis, it would have seemed strange indeed. It would have led those close to Him to worry. In His graciousness, He did not want them to worry. So, He ate (even though human food must have tasted like excrement to a future god). I suspect He didn't reveal any sign of His disgust. I suspect He didn't vent His anger at the prospect of having to go through the charade of human existence. Make no mistake, the future god shall be a *wrathful* god, but also a god not without mercy.

Perhaps the most merciful thing the future god did was reply to my letters. Oh, you cannot imagine the celebration that commenced upon my receipt of the first! I was in the post office (I rented a box there, so the new god's mail would not have to brush up against mail from those who are unclean). I even had a talk with the postal clerk to explain to her that my P.O. box was *not* to receive any junk mail. I didn't tell her about the sacredness of the mail to be received in that box, but I'm sure she got the message after I smudged burnt sage over the insides. The postal clerk smiled and told me she could make an exception to the ordinary rule that everyone had to receive junk mail in their box, whether they wanted it or not.

That's one of the reasons I love New Harmony. People understand me more here than they've ever understood me anywhere else. It is a town steeped in spirituality. But I digress.

The first communication I received from the new god was as simple as it was provocative. Just seven words. (*Seven*. Of course it would be *seven*. A signal, clear as day.)

WHO ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT?

It was obvious to me they were exactly the sort of questions a soon-to-be god would ask one of His worshipers. Perhaps these were to become the very first questions in a new catechism in which adherents would become initiated into a new faith. Who was I, indeed? What, exactly, did I want?

I studied the paper. Right there in the post office, I smelled it, trying to get a whiff of Him. (But what, exactly, had I expected? Did I actually think my human nose could discern a particular odor indicative of *godhood*? What did a god smell like? Ozone? Ambrosia?)

I scurried home so I could pen my response. I endeavored to follow my god's example. Keep things simple, clear. How difficult, however, to keep things simple when corresponding with someone on the verge of godhood! I didn't want to answer His questions. I wanted to ask my own. (Why do we die? Who will fire the first missile, Bush or Gorbachev? Is it Thy will for the missiles to be fired? Would it be fitting, since the world was once destroyed by water in the great flood, to now have it destroyed by fire? Would that bring everything back into balance? Is there anything we can do to avoid this fate, or should we embrace it to create a clean slate?)

I restrained myself, and focused only on answering His questions. I thought long and hard about my answers. I spent an entire day fixated on them. I did not shower or bathe. I did not turn on the television or listen to the radio. I paced. I chewed my nails. I retrieved my calligraphy pen and my paper and would start a response, only to rethink my answer halfway through and toss it into the wastebasket.

In the end, I sent Him a one-page letter that read, simply (in seven holy words):

I'M YOUR SERVANT. I WANT TO SERVE.

* * *

The hierophant didn't say much in that first reply (at least, nothing *surprising*). He just said something about being a servant. I considered going to the post office and telling them about it, because this guy who I'd never met seemed like he was borderline-queer over me. I might have felt

disgust at the way the college girls strutted like whores, but I wasn't a faggot, either. If this guy *was* a faggot, I might retch; I mean, *really* retch. I considered going back to ignoring the letters again, but I didn't think that was possible.

I'd crossed an invisible line and now couldn't go back. I'd made a decision to talk to this guy in Indiana. He'd mailed a letter back. When I didn't answer him, he mailed another, and another. I thought about changing my address to another P.O box. I thought about burning the letters as they came in and mailing the ashes back to the hierophant, with a note *explaining* they were the ashes of his letters.

I couldn't decide how to deal with this uninvited intrusion in my life, but I had no one to confide in. No one to help me think all of this through.

I thought about trying to tell Arihiro, but he'd probably just shake his head and say: "That sucks. That sucks *so* bad." Then he'd put on his headphones and listen to Kitaro on his boom box.

Never once, though, did I even consider bringing this to the attention of Mom and Dad. I was born in 1970, which means most of the kids I grew up with had hippie parents. Not me. Mom and Dad were old enough to be Grandmom and Granddad. Mom had me when she was 36 and she had my younger brother, Daniel, when she was 40. I don't think kids should have parents that old. It creates problems. Problems like Daniel.

He was all messed up. "Profoundly mentally retarded," was the label a doctor had given him. That meant he wasn't like the cute, Cabbage-Patch-Doll-looking retarded kid you'd see in the Special Olympics. He wasn't like that Corky kid from TV. He was the glassy-eyed, grunting, scratching, helmet-wearing, shit-smelling kind of retarded kid. He was the kind of retarded kid who had to be shipped off and prayed for. I don't remember my parents being all into *praying* until Daniel was born. After that, it seems like all they did was church stuff, which was bad news for me.

They watched Pat Robertson on the *700 Club*. They thought *Dungeons & Dragons* was a tool of the devil, and forbade me from playing it. They didn't want me to move away from home. They thought I wasn't ready. They said I'd had a rough time in high school and needed to stay close to home.

I did have a rough time in high school. That much is true. But I'd gone to community college and straightened up my act. Got all "A"s. Did it while only going to one doctor's appointment every three months, too. I think it

was because there was less stress. The great thing about community college was that lots of people were there getting their degree in their thirties and forties. I didn't have to deal with all the social-ladder bullshit like I did in high school.

All of this is just a long, roundabout way of saying my parents weren't good folks to consult in this matter. They had their own problems, with praying for Daniel and everything. If I'd told them any of this, they would have made me a shrink's appointment. They would have had me going there every week again. Even if I showed them the letters, they would have twisted things around and insisted I needed to go to the doctor. So, I didn't tell them. I went to a college three hours away from home for a reason. Why invite them into my life so they could meddle?

I decided I didn't need to have an immediate plan for how to handle the letters. I decided it wouldn't hurt anything at all to wait a week. I continued to attend classes. I continued to smoke pot with Arihiro. I continued to read my assignments. But I also started to make regular visits to the Chesapeake Bay, so I could think about all of this. The waves breaking against the shore calmed my mind.

There was a place on the bay, about forty-five minutes away from campus, called Calvert Cliffs State Park. They said Miocene-era shark teeth were embedded in the tall bluffs overlooking the water. After storms, some of them washed down to the beach. There was a nuclear power plant there, too. From the state park beach, you could see the cooling towers. This struck me as being something like a bad joke (especially considering what had happened in Chernobyl).

I owned a blue two-door Honda Civic I'd bought for a song from this girl Lydia, back home, who gets a new car every year on account of the fact her family's well-off. I can see why they got rid of it. It was stuffy in a way I could only imagine a coffin being stuffy. The air inside always seemed airless. Like maybe it was fake air. It had plastic upholstery, which added to the ambiance of fakery. One time, driving up to Calvert Cliffs after smoking with Arihiro, I began to ponder if *I* was fake. Maybe, I thought, I was a fake me sitting on a fake seat in a fake car, driving down a fake road towards a fake beach-and-cooling-tower landscape, to mull over the fake adulation of a fake man in a fake town who thought I was a god.

But I soon came to my senses. The air was real. If it wasn't real, how could I be breathing? And if the air was real, that meant the upholstery

might be real. And if the upholstery might be real, then the entire car might be real. And if the car was real, the road and the beach and the Miocene shark teeth and the nuclear plant might be real.

If I'm god, I thought, *then I should be able to shut this power plant down with just a thought—to keep everyone safe. If I'm god, I should be able to just think the right thoughts and put an end to war everywhere. If I'm god, I should be able to walk on water.*

I waited in my car until after dark, so I could be alone. Then I found a quiet place on the beach. No one else was there. I walked through the sand and inhaled a whiff of bay water. Not quite freshwater. Not quite seawater. Just a hint of salt. I thought about what I was about to do and giggled.

I realized that if I made an attempt to walk on water, I might be taking my first step toward divinity. But I also knew my parents would have had me committed if they'd known I was contemplating this experiment. I knew it would have *looked* and *sounded* insane. But my parents were three hours away. And there was a certain *mental texture* to ideas many reckoned to be insane that I found…pleasing. What I mean is: insane ideas kind of felt good in my head. They felt better in my head than my parents' ideas felt. If insanity was so bad, why did it feel so good?

(And, besides, my parents' ideas were only counted as sane because billions of other people shared them. "Sanity," as something in and of itself, didn't really exist. The concept had been created and sustained by consensus. Why should it be considered not only sane, but downright *orthodox* to believe the old god walked on water, but crazy for me to even *test out* my own ability to do the same?)

I took a step in.

There was splashing as my feet dropped through the bay's surface and hit the rock and sand underneath. This made the man from New Harmony, Indiana, seem like a charlatan. I decided I would confront him on this matter. I endeavored to write a letter in which I put all of my cards on the table. I would explain I wasn't certain he actually existed, and I wasn't certain the car existed. But I took it on a certain amount of faith that they existed, so I could test the hypothesis, and when I made the attempt to walk on water, I couldn't, and this made me question *everything*.

This is what I *intended* to write. What I *ended up* writing was the following:

I’M NOT GOD (CAN’T WALK ON WATER)

* * *

I had a great deal more hope after getting the next letter from the future god. He appeared not only to be entertaining the real possibility of His godhood, but also challenging the reality around Him. To date, both of us had restricted ourselves to seven words in each piece of correspondence. This seemed to be the god-to-be’s way of expressing Himself. I felt awkward about the idea of communicating with Him using more than seven words, yet I also felt He was at the stage of needing more in-depth assistance. If I kept my communication to only seven words, I would fail Him by providing Him with insufficient guidance. But if I exceeded seven words with my communication, I risked unintentionally alienating Him by suggesting I was abandoning His lead and simply following my own whim.

This was just the first of many instances in which my responsibilities as hierophant were at odds with my responsibilities as a worshiper. Mine was a precarious position. I was a spiritual figure with a destiny of my own, of course, endowed with powers and perspectives unreachable by even the most imaginative layman. Strictly speaking, the soon-to-be-god could not emerge into full godhood without my assistance. Yet I was mortal. I was a creation, not a Creator. I was constantly walking a line, alternating between instructing Him and submitting to Him.

With regard to the matter of the seven words, I decided to enact a sort of compromise in which I would begin the letter with a seven-word salutation, in deference to the soon-to-be-god’s preference, and then continue on with a great deal more text below such a greeting.

I started the letter this way:

YOU WILL MAKE NEW WATER. BETTER WATER.

I then went into detail, explaining He couldn’t possibly tread on water that had been created by the old, inferior god. The water didn’t yield to Him, because He wasn’t its maker. Most likely, the water resented Him, because it sensed He would one day replace it with a newer, better version. Hence, it could not be counted on to follow commands.

The water was loyal to the dying god, and would maintain that loyalty until that god’s last breath (and possibly even afterward).

No, if He wanted to walk on water, He would first have to learn how to create new oceans. I told Him this was what hierophants were for. I let Him know the history of men such as myself—that we've existed throughout the universe, since time immemorial, to help gods learn to *be* gods. Each soon-to-be god has needed a hierophant to assist Him (and, ultimately, *the world around Him*) with the transition.

This was also the letter in which I informed Him there were seven tasks of initiation He would need to complete to achieve apotheosis. I did not tell Him what all seven tasks *were*. I only told Him the first task. Hierophants are forbidden from disclosing all seven tasks, at once, to gods-to-be.

Well, let me rephrase that. To be honest, I cannot swear that *all* hierophants, over the entire width of space and breadth of time, have been forbidden from disclosing such things. I can only relate *my own experience* of being forbidden to reveal all seven tasks at once. John the Baptist passed along the rules to me.

I'd been invited to a cornfield on the outskirts of New Harmony to investigate a report of a crop circle, but instead discovered the prophet. His shriveled head was on top of a scarecrow's body. When he flapped his lips open, no words came out. Only coughing croaks. At least, that's how it seemed, at first. Turns out he *was* talking, just very quietly (in whispers that rushed out of his mouth like escaped prisoners in between coughs). He spoke in Aramaic. I'd only understood him because I'd taken Aramaic in divinity school.

"Seven tasks," he said. "One chosen man plus seven chosen tasks equals one god. He must be told about them only a little at a time. *You* must tell Him about them. If you disclose them to Him all at once, He may be tempted to rush ahead. He may be tempted to skip steps to reach power more quickly, and then you will have risen a demon instead of a god."

There were no eyes in his sockets, but I felt like he was staring at me, nonetheless. What could I do but fall to my knees? In divinity school, we discussed the concept of *mysterium tremendum*—the sense of awe and horror experienced during an encounter with the nameless numinous. Prior to that day, all I knew of this was theory. For all my time engaged in prayer, meditation, fasting and the use of sacred drugs, I'd never before encountered the transcendent in such a way that gooseflesh seemed to erupt from both outside and inside my skin. That day in the cornfield, I did.

I wanted to shout my destiny from the rooftops, just as the Baptist had over two thousand years ago. “I will build a temple to your honor, John. Right here on this property. I’ll buy it from the present owner. You can’t tell by the way I dress, but I have money, you see. I wish to commemorate the time and place in which you passed on to me the mission of assisting a man become god!”

Flakes of dried flesh fell from the head as it scowled. The mouth slackened, giving birth first to a gasp, then to a wail, then to a warning. “You’d do well, hierophant, to beware of my example. I preached the coming of the Messiah. I baptized thousands before baptizing Him, and in doing so I may have made believers but I also made enemies. When you seek out the new god and when you instruct Him in His seven tasks for apotheosis, you should act with stealth and cunning. Let no one know you are the hierophant. Not even after the god you have trained has risen to a place of ascendancy over the old god. You’ll be tempted to boast of your triumph, but you must be aware that you are the weakest link in the chain of divinity. Those resentful about the old god’s fall will seek to take vengeance on you, because you will be far easier to find and kill than the new god will be.”

This puzzled me. “I don’t understand. If I’m to orient a new god to His role as ascendant master of this galaxy, then that means I’ll be complicit in the destruction of the old god—presumably, I would think, the god you helped bring to power. Why should I trust a word you say? How do I know you’re not wishing me ill?”

“Because,” the head howled, “this is the way the magick works! The nature of things requires me to play an active role in both a god’s creation and His destruction. Why else do you think I linger so? I must forgo resting in peace until the god I helped usher into power fades away. It will be the same for you, one day. Your loyalty isn’t to *the god*, it’s to the proper *passing of gods, one after another*. People like you and I exist to ensure the succession proceeds in as orderly a manner as possible.”

I felt a churning in my stomach and a chill on my soul. From early childhood, I knew I had been set apart for a holy mission. My work was to be that of the spirit. And yet, here I was, engaged in conversation with one of the most famous prophets of all time, and I felt not envy or collegiality but rather despair and disgust. I tried to shove thoughts out of my head but they wouldn’t budge. I became obsessed with the notion that, one day two

thousand years from now, I would be in John's place. I would be a tired, lingering spirit waiting for the death of a tired, lingering god. I felt blessed and damned all at once. I croaked something about understanding and obeying and accepting my lot in the scheme of things.

Then he elaborated on the Seven Tasks. Shivers ran repeatedly down my spine as the Baptist passed down to me his knowledge of the Sevenfold Path to Godhood. A burning sensation accompanied the Words as they passed from my ears to my brain. The sensation grew sharper, hotter, fiercer until in the end I could no longer look at John. My head grew heavy under the weight of the new knowledge that inhabited it, and I had no choice but to leave the place, trembling.

I went home, weeping every mile of the drive, and wrote my letter—the one in which I instructed the god-to-be of His first task, the creation of a man, out of nothing, using only the force of His mind.

* * *

I walked into my dorm room and smelled the odor of Arihiro's afternoon delight wafting through the air: the tangy scent of sex mixed together with the sour stench of body odor, the piercing smell of perfume, and… something else. Something smelling like plastic melting in a microwave.

Arihiro was on the floor, in the corner, smoking something out of a glass pipe. There was a woman with him. She looked as frail as a Holocaust victim. She was missing teeth and had dry, bleached-blonde hair that reminded me of straw. Arihiro kept running his fingers through it. I was surprised it didn't rustle when it moved. She had a tattoo of a rose on the tiny breast Arihiro was groping, and the ink's colors had long ago begun to fade into her faked-tan skin. She looked older than us.

She didn't belong on campus. She looked like a townie. The only way I imagined her even knowing how to get onto campus was if she held some sort of menial job with the cafeteria or in janitorial services. Maybe that's how Arihiro had found her. Or maybe he went out to the local strip club. They say the women there are whores.

I felt my hands curl into fists and my pulse begin to pound in my temples. Arihiro giggled and inhaled from the pipe. "That sucks," he said. "That sucks *so bad*."

I turned around, walked out, and slammed the door. I jogged to the bathroom and vomited. I didn't bother flushing it. That's when I decided to walk down to the post office to see if the hierophant's letter had arrived. Never had I felt more relieved to see the crazy, crinkled envelope awaiting me. I let my hand linger over the seal for a moment, trembled with excitement, and tore it open. I read it right there in the lobby.

The letter explained why I hadn't been able to walk on water. The water, it seemed, was Christ's water. Made by him, and therefore owned by him. Like a slave, it did his bidding. If the hierophant knew what he was talking about, then this answered several questions. For example, it suggested there was something to the idea of predestination. If all the currently existing matter and energy was owned by the reigning god, if everything was simply the reigning god's chattel, then free will was an illusion. I'd suspected this was true for a very long time. When I was a junior in high school, I made the naïve mistake of trying to share this discovery with my parents. I tried telling them we were "like automatons." But they took it literally. Mom told the doctor I thought "everyone was robots," and I ended up getting shipped off to Restful Meadows for a week. (The name was an utter crock, by the way. They had *real* schizophrenics there who screamed and screamed until someone gave them a shot, rendering the place about as "restful" as an abattoir. And if there was ever a meadow within five miles of the place, it had long ago been developed into a strip mall.)

I wondered, for a moment, if the hierophant had ever spent time at a place like Restful Meadows. I wondered, for a moment, if *Christ* would have been put away in a place like Restful Meadows if they'd had them around when he was starting out as god. Then I stopped wondering about Restful Meadows, because the memories of the place began to make me glum.

The hierophant hadn't written to make me glum. He'd written to put me on the path to godhood. He told me that if I wanted to walk on water, I needed to create some of my own. I needed to create whole new oceans. The prospect both daunted and enthused me.

But then the hierophant's tone abruptly changed. He stopped talking about oceans and started talking about Seven Tasks I must complete to become a god. He said he could not tell me what all the tasks were, he could only tell me the first.

“Using only Your mind, make a man,” the hierophant had written. “When You have done this, send me a letter telling me how You made him and what he is like. Feel free to draw a sketch or take a photograph.”

I thought about where I should perform this first task. I didn’t care to return to my dorm room just now. Judging by Arihiro’s groping of the woman’s breast and the smile on his face, I guessed he was likely going to be rutting atop her again. So I drove out to Calvert Cliffs. This was a weekday in the middle of September, just around sunset. There might still have been visitors there, of course, but they would’ve been few and far between. I was able to find a stretch of sand to call my own, a place where I could attempt the first task without being disturbed. (“To call my own”—hilarious, now that I think about it. The sand was spoken for thousands of years ago. It belonged to Christ.)

How could I be sure it wasn’t watching me? How could I be certain that each grain of sand at my feet, each puffy cloud in the sky, each fish flopping around in the bay, wasn’t a spy for Christ? How could I stop them from noticing me? The hierophant’s notion of the chattel-like nature of reality changed everything. I wasn’t yet sure that I bought it hook, line, and sinker. But, without a doubt, this correspondence intrigued me (as, I think, it should ideally intrigue any liberal arts student who is truly committed to the principle of free inquiry; that is to say, those liberal arts students more interested in the pursuit of knowledge than the pursuit of redneck pussy).

Indeed, the ongoing correspondence with the hierophant wasn’t at odds with my education; to the contrary, it was a logical extension of it. It was like my correspondence with the hierophant was a graduate-level special research project on the nature of reality. Why should I bother focusing on tedious introductory survey courses when I had something far more fascinating demanding my attention?

I decided to err on the side of safety. If I had any words to say while engaged in the act of creation, I would mumble them softly rather than scream them. In the event there were any wild gestures I had to make, I would inhibit them to the degree possible. And, just for good measure, I decided to seek out the same quiet stretch of beach as I’d gone to before. (That place on the beach where the nuclear plant’s cooling towers loomed most inescapably on the horizon; likely the most deserted stretch of beach because people visiting Calvert Cliffs couldn’t make sense of the ugly juxtaposition of nature and nuclear power). I was visiting this beach for the

quiet, though, not the scenery. I had no problem with such scenery. After all, if the hierophant was right, the nuclear power plant wasn't *my* nuclear power plant. It, like everything else, belonged to the old god. If the hierophant was right, I could change things when I came into power. Put a forest where the cooling towers were, for example.

I decided to sit on a fallen log on the shore and watch the tide wash over the sand. The sour-salt scent of the bay hit my nostrils and a breeze tousled my hair like a condescending father. I began to wonder if I would have any use at all for tides or for beaches once I took over. This initiated another line of thought: when I became god, would I remake everything using the present galaxy as raw materials, or would I simply obliterate the world and start over from scratch?

The tide surged onto the shore, dampening my jeans and underwear and making my perch even more precarious than it had been when I first sat down. As the foamy surf lurched back out to the bay, I grabbed a handful of wet sand and began to wonder if I could make a man out of it. In some ways, I liked the idea of taking Christ's sand and Christ's shore and commandeering them for my own purposes. It seemed a little mean-spirited, like adding insult to injury. I would not only depose the old god, I'd reshape his crude matter in all sorts of new ways just to show how unimaginative he'd been. I'd show him just how gloriously strange a world I could make, using the very same materials he had at his disposal.

I grasped the tide-soaked sand in my left hand and looked down at the hierophant's letter I held in my right. I read the pertinent line:

USING ONLY YOUR MIND, MAKE A MAN.

I began to parse this commandment for additional clarity. What, exactly, did the hierophant mean by "man?" Did he mean my creature needed to be male, complete with some sort of phallus? Did he mean it would need to have two arms, two legs, a head, eyes, nose, and mouth? If so, this seemed to be an unfair constraint on my freedom. If I were to become a god, then shouldn't I have the right to use my imagination to depart from the design of my predecessor?

But these were merely aesthetic considerations. Instead of fretting about whether my creature must have a head, I shifted my focus to what sort of brain should inhabit that head. Or, to be more precise, what sorts of thoughts should inhabit that brain.

I closed my eyes and turned to the notion of consciousness. By almost any layman's definition, mankind was an animal set apart from the rest of nature by its particular form of consciousness. Humanity had an awareness of past, present, and future. Each human had an awareness of its own demise.

But there *were* exceptions. Daniel, for example. I don't want to sound like I'm insulting my own brother, but it always seemed to me as though he was—mentally—more akin to a squirrel or a deer than a man. I could tell he had thoughts—or at least, mental *processes*. But I doubt he had any real notion of the future, aside from a concern about when his next meal was coming.

In a lot of ways, having Daniel as a brother was a burden. But as I sat there on the beach, I realized his existence gave me a clue in how to approach the hierophant's challenge. I realized, at that point, that I could create a man wholly lacking in *consciousness*. (There were, after all, other people like Daniel. And there were also people afflicted with various brain maladies who lingered in persistent vegetative states. They were human, and yet they lacked consciousness. Thus humanity could exist *without* consciousness.) I could accomplish the hierophant's first task in quite a simple way by going this route, as the creation of consciousness was likely the most complex aspect of creation. By omitting consciousness from my creation, I would be saving myself a step. It would be quicker. Easier.

At the same time, I would be improving upon mankind, as created by the old god. After all, consciousness seemed more of a curse than a gift. Arihiro Takahashi possessed consciousness in abundance—consciousness capable of contemplating physics—and yet he seemed hell-bent on immolating that consciousness in one pipe or another. My parents had consciousness, but abdicated its higher properties to the old god and his minions. My classmates had consciousness, but focused it on the task of obtaining access to copulation. The old god had been careless in granting his creations a piece of himself. Consciousness was rightly only the province of gods and hierophants.

I would fix the mistake.

I crept farther inland to avoid being fully immersed in the rising tide. I moved to the very edge of where the bay had snuck in. The sand was moist and workable. There were oyster shells and tiny, smooth pebbles bearing

fossil impressions of ancient plants and the animals that had slithered about this place in eons past.

Fancying the rock and shell to be something akin to bone and the mud to be something akin to flesh, I sculpted my first man. I gave him a mouth, but no tongue. I gave him eyes (black pebbles), a nose, and ears (tiny half-shells). I gave him short, squat arms and legs (if I tried to make him as tall as me, he would have toppled over; no, this man stood only one foot tall). I made his head flat on top so that he resembled Frankenstein's monster. I made him this way to render it impossible for him to ever evolve a brain sufficient to achieve consciousness.

And when I was done, I looked down at the being, down into his eyes. He didn't look back. I suspect he didn't much care for being brought into existence. I couldn't blame him. But everything I knew about becoming a god I'd learned from the hierophant. I had no recourse but to create. That was the hideous gauntlet that had been thrown down. If I wanted to explore the possibility of my godhood, I had no choice but to accept the challenge.

The tide began to surge farther inland, bringing with it foam and plastic debris from some boater's recent excursion: Solo cups somehow still reeking of rum. The tide nibbled at the toes of my creature with one wave, and then—with a sudden lurch inland—swept up and over it, knocking loose its ears and disfiguring it to such an extent it no longer looked bipedal. It now looked like a damp, froglike thing (albeit, adorned with a human face) hunching down on its appendages rather than standing on them.

I took this incident with the tide as confirmation that the old god lived on borrowed time, and knew it. He knew it, and envied me my youth. Used his petty resources to deform my creation. I then vowed I would not allow him to prevail. I took what was left of my creature into my hands, and walked back to the car (that plastic, unreal-feeling car with its stuffy coffinlike air). I placed my creature on the passenger seat and noticed it had lost an eye during the walk from the shore to the parking lot. It had also become less defined while in my hands...began to look less like a being at all and more like a clump of wet sand.

I felt uneasy and realized two girls about my age were in a car on the other side of the parking lot, staring at me. St. Edwards was a small campus (fewer than 1,500 students) and I thought I recognized them as girlfriends of two of the lacrosse players. They wore snug cut-off shorts that gave boast

to the availability of their baby-making factories and T-shirts that gave boast to their baby-suckling apparatuses. To an average guy my age, they were desirable. But I knew they were nothing more than carbon-based automatons (for all I knew, dispatched here by the old god to stir my own reproductive urges and distract me from the task at hand).

I gritted my teeth, trying to not lose my cool. I wasn't yet ready to announce my imminent godhood. I was keeping everything secret. I vowed I would ignore them.

But then I heard the laugh. That high-pitched kind of laugh you expect to come out of carbon-based sperm receptacles when they're trying to be alluring.

I grabbed the knob, cranked it to lower my window and told them, in my loudest possible voice, just what they were. "Automatons," I screamed. "Automatons!" This seemed only to make them laugh louder. I raised my window, squealed my wheels, and drove off.

I decided this would be the new tact I would take in life. I'd known back in high school that humanity was nothing but automatons, but I'd been cowered into submission by my stay at Restful Meadows. The hierophant's letters freed me; enabled me to act boldly. Allowed me to call a spade a spade.

The old god had a firm grip on the control panel of reality, I would readily admit that much. He was the one who made the tide surge forward to deform my creation. But, more importantly, the old god also had a firm grip on the *perception* of reality. Well...then again, maybe his grip wasn't all that firm. Maybe, in fact, he had less control over the *perception* of reality than he did over reality itself.

After all, drugs had enabled alternate perception of reality for well over a thousand years, probably more.

So it occurred to me that I would focus my *initial* attack on challenging the old god's mastery over the *perception* of reality. Then I would proceed to challenge his mastery over reality itself. It wasn't long after I armed myself with this plan that I began to implement it. I made a conscious effort to stop looking at the world as the old god planned for me to look at it. That's the first time I was able to look at the creature in the passenger seat and see him as he really was—not as an amalgamation of mud, shell, and rock but as flesh and fat and bone. Not as a tiny, half-man-like, half-toad-

like effigy but as a tiny, half-man-like, half-toad-like creature with breath and the capacity to move—if it felt so motivated.

I stroked my creature's rubbery brown skin and it made a cooing, purring sound. "Welcome to existence, my little Hop-frog." And that became its name.

I intentionally drove slowly on the way back to my dorm. After my act of creation, I had lots of questions to consider. I knew Hop-frog lived and breathed, but Arihiro might see him as just a pile of sand and shells. He was still under the thrall of the old god's definition of reality. As I began to come into my own as the new god, I would need to help him see things the way *I* saw them. I would not only have to do this with Arihiro, but also with billions of others of his kind. (Of course, one way around all this would be to simply eradicate all of humanity like so many ants crashing my picnic; another way would be to keep the humans themselves, but eradicate all human *consciousness* when I came into my full godhood. If there was no consciousness, then there would be no way for that consciousness to be *tricked* into still believing in the old god and his version of reality even after I'd replaced him.)

All of this was complicated business.

I considered the ethics of the situation. I wondered if it might not be better to try to convince Arihiro to accept the reality of Hop-frog's existence by persuasion, rather than by force. Part of me didn't think this would even be possible, due to the language barrier. But with a god, all things are possible.

As I drove through the dusk, I felt the spying eyes of the Man in the Moon glowering down at me. He had to know what was going on with me (of course he knew, the old god would have had to manipulate the moon as a way to manipulate the *tides* earlier when he had disfigured Hop-frog.) I looked up at the first evening stars. I began to see them for what they were—not masses of hot gas out in distant space. Not masses of *anything*, in reality. I came, at that time, to realize the stars were nothing more than tiny little pinprick holes that had been poked in the tarp of night. Holes from which the bright light of heaven shown forth. Holes out of which a certain old-you-know-who gawked to spy on me.

I cranked down the window and thrust my left hand out. I gave the old god the middle finger. "Gaunt god, haunt god!" I screamed. I kept the window down so the old god could hear me. He already knew I was coming

for him. Was there really any need for subtlety at this point? Was subtlety even my style? Was subtlety even befitting a god?

I turned on the car radio. Cranked up the volume as high as it could go. I typically didn't care for any noise from the outside world to corrupt my thoughts. I'd always felt apart from the world, and felt its noise to be little more than pollution. But that night, I felt like indulging in a celebration. The song was a sad little ditty. I laughed when I heard it. I considered it a funeral dirge for the old god's reign. "Close my, close my, close my eyes," the singers sighed. Then later, with a bit more force, they crooned, "Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies...oh, no, no you can't disguise."

I giggled so hard my eyes teared up. I screamed out the window for the old god and all of his creation to hear me. "No, you dying fucker, you *can't* disguise! Your creatures won't be seeing the world as you've disguised it anymore. Not any longer! My reality is ascending! Not yours! Mine!" I regretted there weren't any other cars on the road. The old god must have arranged it so that there would be no additional traffic in my vicinity, so that his minions wouldn't hear my shout of triumph. Fucking weakling.

When I arrived back at the dorm, one of the lacrosse players had his stereo cranked up, playing some nonsense song with the refrain "You've got to fight / for your right / to party" sung by some white kids who thought they were rappers. It didn't have a bunch of heavy bass, but with it turned up as loud as it was, it got on my nerves. I could tell it got on Hop-frog's nerves, too. It made poor Hop-frog cringe. I was glad to get inside my room. At least the thick metal door dulled the sound.

Arihiro was passed out amidst a tangle of cum-stained sheets. The smell of sex and drugs still polluted the air. He looked so vulnerable there. Hop-frog, on the other hand, looked like it was perking up. It moved its head back and forth and started to wobble in my grasp. It wanted down. I think it wanted to say hi to Arihiro.

I put my creature on his bed and it started to half hop, half scurry toward my passed-out roomie. Its long neck craned first to one side and then to the other as it examined him. It breathed in shallow little puffs that lifted his sweaty black hair off his forehead. Then it climbed on top of him.

Arihiro stirred. His eyelids fluttered. I just sort of stood over him and Hop-frog, actually. I began to feel my pulse along my neck and in my ears. I realized my palms were sweating. This would be my first chance to see

how a creature from the old god's reality would interact with a creation from my reality.

A look of disgust crept onto Arihiro's face, crinkling his nose and making his thin lips snarl. I felt a smile begin to trace a path across my face.

"Fuck you," he said. (Confirming, for the first time, that he was in possession of a vaster vocabulary than I'd been led to believe). "Fucking sand, Greg. Fucking sand!" That's when he reached toward Hop-frog. I winced. Arihiro grabbed Hop-frog by the throat, and the creature let out a choking sound. Then he ripped the human neck away from the froglike body, and there was a high-pitched warble that rose rage in my blood. Arihiro tore into my creation like a savage lion tearing into a gazelle.

I lunged forward and tried grabbing Hop-frog away from him, but Arihiro tossed the remaining parts all over the room like so much confetti. He was still bleary-eyed. It seemed to me that he was coming down off his high. I smacked him. He pushed me. I was an inch or two taller than him and must've outweighed him by fifty pounds, so I didn't budge. I smacked him again, harder. Then I tackled him. Then I punched him.

"My reality," I said. I kept walloping him in the face, over and over. I knew I had to get him in the head. Disorient him. "My reality, not the old god's, mine."

I looked down and sensed Arihiro actually *feared* me. His eyes had gotten wide, his brow raised, his mouth hung slack-jawed.

This is how I learned that a god sometimes needs to use physical punishment to get attention. Arihiro was, in many ways, no different than much of the rest of the human race. All disrespect and backtalk until a god brought down the iron fist. After I'd gotten a few licks in, Arihiro's gut started to spasm and he dry-heaved. It was a whiny, insistent little sound. I laughed, then brought my knee down on his belly. Gray vomit oozed out of his mouth. A fitting metaphor, I thought; for Arihiro reminded me of nothing so much as a kind of bipedal, sentient vomit that had issued forth from the old god's diseased gullet.

He saw the world the wrong way and, because of that, killed my Hop-frog. This wouldn't do. It was at this point in the evening that I remembered a key passage out of the old god's scriptures. *And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.*

That’s when I grabbed Arihiro’s corkscrew. While he was on his knees, leaning forward, spilling the last pool of bile on the cheap area rug, I ran over to him, grabbed his chin, yanked it upward, and brought the twisting protrusion of the corkscrew down into his dark pupil.

The music outside the door came to a rest, and for a moment the only sound I could hear in the entire hall was Arihiro shrieking. Then the white rappers started to croon a ditty about a brass monkey, and the lacrosse players started to sing along, and my roommate’s cries were once again drowned out. That’s when I plunged the corkscrew into the second eye.

The old god had constructed the human eye in such a way that it was difficult to dislodge. There were many thin strands of flesh that held each orb in place. I had to sever them before the job could be done completely—no easy task. A lesser god would have been satisfied with simply mutilating Arihiro’s eyes, grounding the eyes up with sufficient force to ensure they would never enable sight of the old god’s reality ever again. That would have been justice.

But it would not have been *mercy*.

Mercy demanded I not merely corrupt the old eyes, but that I also replace them with better eyes (in the same way I would eventually have to replace the old oceans with new ones). And so I severed every nerve and ligament connecting the orb to the muscles of the face. The corkscrew was an imperfect tool for this, but I wasn’t able to use a better tool until after Arihiro passed out. Then I fetched his scissors and went to work on him, like the divine surgeon I was.

There was blood, but it was the blood of sacrifice. Arihiro’s old eyes had to go to make room for new ones. There was blood, but it was the blood of divine vengeance. He had eviscerated my innocent creation. A god could not let such a blasphemy go unpunished.

I looked at the pieces of my Hop-frog, littering Arihiro’s bed and the surrounding floor. Parts of him had even ended up on the wall. I had two tasks before me: I had to heal Hop-frog from his injuries—remake him. Then I had to give Arihiro new eyes.

I started with Hop-frog. He had been shredded into many tiny pieces. Therefore, I was unable to reassemble all of him. The logistics of the moment forced me to render his new incarnation in the shape of a sphere. I found Hop-frog’s own, single, dislodged eye and placed it in the center of his ball-shaped body. I smiled. In his new shape, Hop-frog reminded me of

one of the monsters (“The Beholder”) from *Dungeons and Dragons*. I made sure to give him a mouth.

After healing (or, if you will, resurrecting) my creation, I spotted the two small shells I’d used to make Hop-frog’s ears. I thought about how best to use them. I inserted one under each of Arihiro’s eyelids, as though they were super-hard, opaque contact lenses. “New eyes,” I declared, “to see beyond the disguise.”

Arihiro grunted. His arms started to spasm. He seemed to be coming to. I held Hop-frog up in front of him. “Now, tell me what you see.”

He whispered a response in Japanese.

I slapped him.

“That’s not the language of your god! In English! Or do I need to give you a new tongue, too?”

He passed out again. I took a deep breath and considered my options. Perhaps he needed to be punished. But how? I thought about killing him. I had a number of pills prescribed for me by the doctor back home. I considered pouring them all down Arihiro’s throat and watching what happened. Surely, death by overdose would have been more merciful than simply stabbing him with the screwdriver we’d used to assemble his bookshelf. And, as the hierophant had told me, I was to become a vengeful god, but not a god without mercy.

But then I reconsidered. I decided Arihiro was understandably shaken up after his ocular transformation. He likely just needed time to adjust. I decided to give him that time. I made a little improvised bed for him in his closet: complete with pillows, sheets and a blanket. Then I grabbed the roll of duct tape we’d used to hold the area rug down. I bound his wrists and ankles, then gagged him with underwear. I applied duct tape over the underwear to hold it in place.

It felt good to be god.

Then I dragged his naked, passed-out ass into the closet. Closed it. There wasn’t a lock on the door, so I started to look around for things in our room that I could use to barricade him in. I could push the desk over. But ultimately, that wouldn’t hold him. I could even put our little mini-fridge on top of the desk to give it extra weight, but I doubted that would do the trick.

Barricading, it seemed, wouldn’t work. Then I remembered my time at Restful Meadows. They only locked the *real* psychos up in seclusion. The rest of us were imprisoned by the sheer power of sedation. They used pills

to keep us in line. In the first week of my Psychology 101 class, Dr. Hopkins mentioned that, during the course of the semester, we would be discussing ethical issues like the use of “chemical straitjackets.” I suspected he was referring to the use of sedation to control people.

So I decide to give Arihiro some of my pills. (Specifically, Stelazines). They would keep him sleepy enough so he wouldn’t resist his captivity, and I seemed to be doing just fine since I’d cut back on them a few weeks ago —so it wasn’t like I would be *missing them*. I needed to study, and the Stelazines always knocked me on my ass by seven thirty. (That’s why I cut back; the coursework may have been easy, but not so easy I could do it while *tranquilized*.)

To be on the safe side, I gave Arihiro twice the number of pills I was supposed to take each day after supper. Between that and the added sedation caused from coming down from whatever drug he was smoking with the whore, he would probably be asleep for the whole day. Maybe even two days. Perfect. I needed time to think without worrying about him escaping. I had to plan my next steps for converting him to my reality. I also needed to draw a picture of my dear, cyclopean Hop-frog and write a letter to the hierophant to inform him of my progress. The lobby of our post office was open all night and only a five-minute walk from the dorm, so I left Arihiro asleep in the closet while I made a quick trip. But before doing any of that, I gave the area rug a good scrubbing with Woolite.

* * *

Since the population of New Harmony is fewer than a thousand people, you’d think everyone would be in everyone else’s business. You’d think the lady at the post office would try to strike up a conversation with me about just what sort of mail was so urgent I needed to open it right then and there. You’d think the Methodists would knock on my door and ask me why I didn’t go to the Methodist church and the Baptists would knock on my door and ask me if I was saved. But that wasn’t the kind of a small town New Harmony was.

People in New Harmony knew I was a defrocked minister, for example, and they were okay with it. There was a fifteen-foot wooden cross still on my property, down by the pond. Along the roadside, there was a fifteen-foot-tall sign listing the Ten Commandments. (Both were left behind by the

previous owner, an enthusiastic Pentecostal who thought they would serve as fine tools for evangelism—even though I could count the number of cars passing the property each day on one hand). Whenever anyone asked me when I was going to repaint the Ten Commandments (which had started to fade and peel), I admitted I was a heretic who just hadn't gotten up the gumption to take down the Christian decorations. I was just too damned busy to attend to aesthetic matters. I'd keep them up there, but I wasn't about to spend time maintaining them.

The town nonetheless welcomed me into its bosom. No one attempted to proselytize me into a more conventional path. Even the townsfolk who were skeptical of my multiple paranormal investigations seemed to be supportive of my right to undertake them. You typically don't find that in small-town Indiana.

But New Harmony was a town with a *history*, you see. A spiritual history. A history of attracting people who had a different way of seeing gods. That's why I moved here. That must've been why John the Baptist had showed up here, too.

Back in the early 1800s, two different groups tried to recreate Eden here. The Harmonists were German pietists; which is just a way of saying they were Christians, albeit atypical. There's some evidence they practiced alchemy and were influenced by theosophy. They formed a little commune here and managed to stay put for about ten years, before selling everything off to a rich communist named Robert Owen, who wanted to make it into a secular Eden. That adventure only lasted two years. Even with all his money, he couldn't make it work. Score that one a victory for the Harmonists, I think. Ten years to two. A blowout.

The Harmonists built a labyrinth here in New Harmony, constructing the "walls" of the winding path out of bushes, vines, and flowering plants. It's so weird to see such a thing displayed so prominently in this otherwise-prosaic little town. It always struck me as the kind of thing you were more likely to run into at a New Age retreat center. But, like I said, the Harmonists had this open-minded side. They built the labyrinth as a way of fostering quiet contemplation.

Technically, there's a difference between a labyrinth and a maze. A maze is designed to fool you with false hope; a maze intentionally tries to tempt you into taking paths that go nowhere. In a labyrinth, there's only one possible way to travel through. There is no deception involved. Just a

twisting, turning path (the traversal through which, some might say, facilitates a spiritual epiphany).

The Harmonists built a tiny log cabin in the middle of their labyrinth, to serve as a place for contemplation after one found his way to the center. After the Harmonists left, the whole setup lay neglected and was eventually swallowed back up into the wild. Back in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the town began to recognize the value of its heritage and built a reconstruction of the old labyrinth. Kept it up nicely ever since.

I spent a lot of time there. In the labyrinth, I mean. Sometimes I brought the new god's letters there to reread them in a setting with greater spiritual import than that of the post office. It was quiet and cool as I wandered along the winding path. Hedges reined me in on either side and I simply had to follow along wherever the path took me.

That's how it was with the new god, as well. I had to simply follow this road (this experience, I mean) wherever it took me. I gave the new god a task—to create a man only using His mind. And yet, the new god told me in His letter that He had used raw materials besides His mind. He'd used the *ground* to make His man.

Not only that, but I specifically assigned Him the job of creating a *man*. Not a *thing*.

Forgive me if this sounds blasphemous, but I deeply regretted that the new god abandoned my instructions so readily (in the very first task, no less). I remembered the words of John the Baptist. He'd warned me that if a future god tried to proceed through the Sevenfold Path too quickly, He might become a demon rather than a god.

And, if I may be so bold as to offer an opinion, the new god's first act of creation appeared...with all due reverence...*rushed*. He drew a picture of the beast, just sitting there in His dorm room at the college, and it looked like nothing so much as perversion incarnate. Based on the drawing the new god provided, it was an animate ball, with a single eye in the middle and a gaping mouth ready to devour whoever stumbled onto it. It was like something straight out of a painting by a certain H. Bosch. Only the new god lacked the skill of Bosch (who managed to imbue his work with almost equal parts beauty *and* hideousness).

In His letter, He boasted of the fact that He deprived the thing of consciousness. And, I suppose, if one is going to spend one's time creating monsters, it is preferable for them to remain *ignorant* of their monstrosity.

But a sense of unease washed over me—the new god had an agenda, His own way of doing things. I needed to put Him on a tighter leash, it seemed. I considered requesting that He kill the creature He'd brought into existence and start over. But I decided first to seek the counsel of John the Baptist, and he cautioned against it.

Let this record reflect that I used powdered chalk to draw a circle in the ground outside my farmhouse, and in that sacred circle I kindled a sacred fire and performed a ritual (sacrificing the rotting, slaughterhouse-discarded heads of seven chickens in the pyre). The nearest neighbor was a mile and a half down the road. No need to worry about people snooping in and disturbing things. Taking the sacred drugs, I summoned the head of John the Baptist. It appeared to me in midst of the fire, but—like Moses's burning bush—was not consumed.

"You should mind your place," the disembodied head mumbled, in Aramaic. "You talk about this beast the new god created as if it were a living obscenity, simply because his appearance makes you quake. Did it never occur to you that the Holy Seraphim and Cherubim might also make you tremble with revulsion? They are, after all, a flutter of burning wings, intermingled with the faces of the lion, the eagle, the ox, and the man. And yet they circle the very throne of heaven, chanting to the reigning god the words of worship: 'Holy, holy, holy.' Mark my words, hierophant, this new god you serve may very well be leading all creation astray into a parade of degeneracy, but it is also possible that He is elevating creation to new heights. It is your role to convince Him of the authenticity of His path and assign Him the tasks required to bring His godhood to fruition, but it is *not* your role to approve His completion of them. Remember, as hierophant you are not fit to touch the new god's sandals."

A great pall of guilt fell over me. I had let this become *my* story. I had indulged *my* ego. I sat beside the fire and watched it gradually succumb to the encroachment of night. The head of John the Baptist first flickered in and out of existence like the flames surrounding it, and then faded away completely. Afterwards, I mortified my flesh, flogging the ego out of myself with forty lashes. I wept, not so much as a result of the pain as a result of the guilt. I had second-guessed the new god. I felt wholly undeserving of the task ahead of me. I resolved to never doubt the rightness of the new god's decisions ever again. I was to convince Him that He was god and I was to tell Him the tasks involved. That was all.

In spite of my distress and bruised back, I slept peacefully and dreamlessly. I did not awake until noontime, and had my flabby belly not started to gurgle, I would have likely slept several more hours. When I awoke, I did not bother with any of the ordinary rituals of hygiene. I did not fret about bathing or brushing my teeth. I committed myself immediately to my epistolary task. I grabbed my calligraphy pen and began the letter.

As always, I started with seven holy words.

YOU MUST SICKEN, THEN CURE, YOUR CREATURE

I went on to explain these were the *second* and *third* steps in the Sevenfold Path to Godhood. The creation and disbursement of plagues, while perhaps an unwelcome task, helped bring balance and range to a divinity's repertoire. Plagues also served a practical purpose of regulating the population. Moreover, they—perhaps more than any other tool of divine intervention—got the attention of creations who might otherwise fail in their duties to worship. "For example," I wrote, "just look at AIDS. The old god created the disease and made it so vexing for the scientists to combat that the people had no recourse but to look beyond humanity's meager resources and cower before their creator. If You are to become the new god, You must master this skill. If it pleases You, I would like to have You send me either a photograph or a drawing of Your creation after it was infected with Your newly created disease. Also, if You would be so kind, please send me a record of the signs and symptoms of this disease. Then, I would like You to document Your efforts to heal the creature. As I understand it, You attend undergraduate studies. Do You have access to a video camera from the college library? If so, make a video of the creature as it is being healed. This will serve as testimony You have completed this third task."

* * *

The day after I gave Arihiro new eyes, I cut all of my classes. I had more important responsibilities than placating professors. Arihiro was in the midst of a transformation from being part of the old god's reality to mine. I went to the cafeteria that morning (letting Hop-frog ride along in my backpack—I kept it unzipped a little so my creation could get enough air). I smuggled a packet of yogurt out of there for Arihiro to eat. When I came back to the dorm room, I let Hop-frog out. It seemed content to roll around mindlessly on the floor while I tended to business.

When I opened the closet door, Arihiro lurched backwards, deeper into the dark recesses of the closet. (Why did he flinch away from the open door? Were his new eyes beginning to work? Perhaps that explained his reaction. Perhaps his new eyes were beginning to heal, but were still quite sensitive to light.)

So benevolent and devoted was I, as his new god, that I took off his gag, endured his groans and his drool, and spoon-fed him. I noticed the pungent scent of urine. The poor bastard had wet himself. I grabbed one of the pitchers he sometimes used to drink beer out of and offered it to him as a piss pot, but he shook his head no whenever I mentioned it.

After that ordeal, I gave him two more Stelazine just to get him back to sleep and *keep* him asleep. Then I put his underwear gag back in and wrapped a fresh swath of duct tape over his mouth. I sat there with him, in silence, until I was sure he'd stay sedated while my reality began to take hold inside of him.

This was my *real* education. And, for this brief period of my own transformation from young man to young god, the hierophant was the only professor whose lessons I needed to heed.

The letters from the hierophant—those very same letters that had so annoyed me just a few weeks ago—were now indispensable guides to my destiny. I knew it would take at least two days for my latest epistle to reach the hierophant, and I knew it would take at least two days for his return correspondence, but that didn't stop me from obsessing about him.

All of his letters had been signed, simply, "The Hierophant." I could tell from the context of his language just what this meant. A "hierophant," I reasoned, was some sort of servant to a god. But I wanted more information. So, when I felt satisfied that Arihiro would *stay* passed out for a while, I shut him back up in his new home in the closet and I went to the library.

From the day I'd arrived at St. Edward's College, I'd felt most comfortable in the library—a three-story, sprawling building marked by the sort of goofy, impractical architecture so popular in the late '60s and early '70s. While I wasn't fond of the architecture, per se, I did enjoy the labyrinthine corridors it facilitated. Any good library should have pockets of isolation—oases of silence and scholarship where someone could tune out from human contact and experience a pure communion with books. The St. Edward's College library was just so constructed. One needed only take

a quick jaunt down one of the twisting, turning hallways to arrive at a room or an alcove one had never even noticed before.

I walked up toward the card catalog and pulled out the drawer for “Hi-Hy.” My fingers flipped through musty-smelling cards bearing details about books on hierarchy, hieroglyphics, and Wild Bill Hickok. But no books in which “hierophant” showed up as a subject or in the title. So I decided to check the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The college had tall, black-bound volumes in this series, and I withdrew the appropriate one from the shelf and found, therein, a brief article on hierophants that would have to suffice.

The *Britannica* article said the hierophant was a certain kind of tarot card in the so-called “Major Arcana.” The article displayed a copy of a typical illustration for the card, and the figure shown looked like nothing so much as the pope.

This aspect of the word had no interest to me. I had no need of fortune-telling devices. I would, in very short order, become the author of fortune itself.

I was more taken with the second use of the word. In ancient Greek times, “hierophant” was the title of the chief priest presiding over a series of rituals called the Eleusinian Mysteries. I replaced this volume on the shelf and retrieved the appropriate *Britannica* volume for “El.” The article on the Eleusinian Mysteries mentioned that their purpose was, to some degree, shrouded in the mists of “hoary antiquity” and secrecy. But there were educated guesses. One professor had put together a theory that the rituals had been designed to help a man transcend his humanity and become like unto a god. Obviously, the ritual was fraudulent. (Multitudes had participated in the Mysteries, and not all of them had become gods.) There were only a handful of true hierophants in human history. The hierophants of the Mysteries were cheap imitations—charlatans trying to absorb some of the power of true hierophants by use of the title.

But my research wasn’t completely in vain. I’d gained an appreciation for just how old a word “hierophant” was. Perhaps more than three thousand years old. Was the hierophant that old? Older? Or was he merely making modern use of an ancient term, adapting it to fit the times? These questions whet my appetite for the day when I might be finally able to meet my teacher, in the flesh, rather than simply receive letters from him.

I grabbed some pocket change and made a few copies of the encyclopedia article on the Mysteries. I reread the article two or three times

while walking from the library back to the dorm. Hierophant. God. Worshippers. Who would have thought such magick could take place against the humble backdrop of the cinderblock walls of Winchester Hall?

I opened the heavy, squeaking, metal door to the dorm and took a whiff of the body odor, pot scent, and humidity that mingled in the stairwell. This wasn't air fit for a god. At some point, a change of scenery would, perhaps, be necessary. Perhaps even inevitable. It was quite obvious I wouldn't linger here at St. Edward's after my apotheosis into godhood. For the first time in a long time, I thought about my parents. What would they make of all this? Would they find their own place in a pantheon of saints—as those who helped bring me into the world so I could transform it? Or, misunderstanding all the work I had ahead of me, would they fight against it (and, in the process, come to earn a place in infamy)?

As certain as I was of my path, there were so many aspects of it that were still uncertain. I understood, at that moment, how Christ must've felt. How, even in the Garden of Gethsemane, he didn't know exactly how shit would go down. How maddening it is, to be a god (or to know that one will, presently, be one) and to still have certain aspects of the future hidden from you!

For example, despite my rising divinity, I hadn't had any premonition that Arihiro would try to get out of the closet.

When I arrived on the second floor of the dorm, I heard a middle-aged woman mumbling muffled Japanese out of our answering machine. When I opened the door, I saw that Arihiro had managed to wriggle, wormlike, out of his new home in the closet. He was half-conscious, but the sound of the woman's voice over the answering machine seemed to have stirred him nonetheless. I turned down the volume on the machine, then worked on wrestling him back to where he belonged.

He wanted to wriggle on the floor like a little caterpillar. But I wasn't content to let Arihiro stay any mere caterpillar. He was due for a transformation. So I wrestled him back into the closet, his snug cocoon for the duration of his metamorphosis from a creature of the old god's to one of mine. He wasn't able to offer much in the way of resistance. (Indeed, had I been in the room, he would have never managed to escape from the closet.)

Still, I wasn't comfortable with him being so mobile. I removed the duct tape once again.

“You need more sleep,” I said, “so you won’t fight what’s happening to you. You need some serenity in your life, friend. There’s no serenity at all to be found in trying to fight a god.” I grabbed another Stelazine and pried Arihiro’s mouth open. It reminded me of when I was back home with Mom and Dad and we had to give the family cat a worming pill. In both cases, the poor creatures needed the medicine but fought against it. They didn’t know what was best for them.

Arihiro tried lots of different things to fight me. He clenched his jaw, pursed his little lips together, shook his head first to the left and then to the right. I slapped him again. Hard. Just to remind him who was boss. I liked slapping him. His new eyes still weren’t working very well, it seemed, because he didn’t see the blows coming. I enjoyed that aspect of his punishment quite a bit.

I had to get on top of him, my knees on his shoulders, to start to take control. I grabbed his upper jaw and lower jaw again and tried dropping the pill down his gullet. But the damned infidel wriggled his head loose from my grip and bit me!

As a vengeful god, I could not let this go unpunished. I stood up, put my hands on my hips, and considered my options. If I’d had a pair of pliers, I would have considered taking out those teeth he liked to bite with! That would have been the very essence of justice!

But it would have been justice left untempered by mercy. And, as the hierophant liked to remind me, I was to become a vengeful god but also not a god without mercy. On contemplation, I decided I had some share of responsibility for the rebellion on my hands. I had expected Arihiro not to fight against the sedation. And, for several hours the night before, that had proved the case. But I’d not been careful and had left the answering machine turned up so that he could hear someone from back home leaving a message for him. I didn’t know exactly what religious beliefs crawled around his mother’s brain—whether she was a Christian or a Buddhist or an atheist or even into some sort of Shinto shit. But it made no difference what she believed. Whether she knew it or not, she was still a subject of the old god’s kingdom, still firmly entrenched in his definition of reality.

She was a bad influence on Arihiro. The mere sound of her voice emboldened him to rebel against me. The mere sound of her voice had acted as a door to the old god’s reality. Arihiro had forgotten just who and what he was.

I had to make certain he never heard her again. I considered making Arihiro new ears, but my experience with creating new flesh and bones was, at this point, confined to breathing life into the old god's sand and rocks and shells. As none of these were currently around me, I had no alternative but to seal off the old ears to minimize their effectiveness.

I moved so that my knee was placed right on top of Arihiro's jaw. He looked mighty uncomfortable, but I had no choice. It was the only way I could hold his head still. I tore off another piece of duct tape, crumbled it up into a ball and stuck it inside his left ear. Then I tore off yet three more pieces of duct tape and crisscrossed them over the outside of his ear.

He whimpered.

I then did the same to his right ear. I knew it wouldn't keep sound out completely, but it would at least muffle it.

I took my knee off of his jaw and pivoted his chin upward so his new shell-eyes looked right into mine. "Mark my words," I said, "the next time I hear you listening to creatures made by the old god, I'm gonna tote your ass outside so I can make you new ears that won't be able to hear such nonsense." Arihiro started to tremble. Grimaced. If he'd still had tear ducts, I think he'd have been crying. He started to whisper words in Japanese, but seemed to have caught himself about halfway through and started speaking in English. "God," he said. "God, god, god, god, god…"

Was he praying? Praying to me? For mercy? I decided to take a gentler tact. Softly (almost tenderly), I took the little blue Stelazine and slipped it between his lips. I placed my hand over his mouth and pinched his nostrils together until I heard him swallow.

Finally.

I dragged Arihiro back to the closet. I sat down with my back against the closet door, to barricade him in as much as possible while the pills did their work. I guessed he'd be out for at least ten hours (probably more) considering that I'd given him yet another pill.

It was a relief when, about an hour later, I heard the first snores.

I was tempted to use this time to get some rest of my own. Part of me sensed it would be wise to get some sleep now, while I could. I was aware I was on the verge of leaving the college for good, and I would be traveling soon. The truth was, though, I was feeling a decreased *need* for sleep. Obviously, some of this had to do with the fact that I'd cut back on the Stelazine. But I think much of it had to do with the fact that I was steadily

becoming more confident in my burgeoning godhood. Gods don't need sleep. It only made sense that, as I came closer to realizing my destiny, I would require less sleep.

I got up off the floor and padded my way over toward Hop-frog. I decided it was time to give him some attention. It'd been such a hectic day. I knew Hop-frog didn't have consciousness, but that didn't stop me from worrying about it possibly becoming jealous of all the time I was spending with Arihiro. I petted it, and it let out a raspy, choking purr. Not quite like the more soothing purr I'd heard come out of its mouth days before, before its injuries. But still, not a bad-sounding vocalization at all. I felt grateful I'd been able to resurrect this little beast and reshape it. I felt grateful the man responsible for its initial destruction was now on the verge of rehabilitation. And, with those happy thoughts swimming through my head, I did slip into a dulled state of consciousness. Not outright sleep, but perhaps a gentle dozing.

The next thing I knew, sunlight had penetrated the room (creeping low, low, low under the drawn shade, but still managing to squeeze inside the dorm). I heard a knock on the door. Arihiro groaned inside his closet-cocoon. I didn't think anything good could come from answering it. I stayed put on the ground.

Then the sound of fingers entering the combination lock code on the outside door handle. A click. Then the sound of the heavy metal door squeaking as it was opened.

"Mr. Bryce?"

I looked up and saw a buff-looking dude just a few years older than me, wearing the casual-cop attire of campus police. Sometimes the campus cops allowed senior criminal justice majors to serve as trainee/interns with them. "I'm sorry. I must not have heard you when you knocked. You see, I was here meditating."

"I'm here to do a welfare check on your roommate, Mr. Takahashi. His mother called. His grandfather in Osaka died. His mother's insisting on speaking to him personally, but there's no sign of him. His physics professor said he didn't show up for his eight a.m. class this morning. Apparently, that's not like him."

"He went off with some girl," I said.

The campus cop got his notepad out of the pocket of his blue campus police T-shirt. "A girl?"

“Well, a woman. She looked older than us. She looked like she came from town.”

The campus cop cleared his throat. I think I heard Arihiro fidget in his sleep at about the same time. The cop didn’t notice. “This girl have a name?”

“I didn’t ask. I walked in on them, well…you know… It wasn’t the kind of experience that facilitated introductions.”

“Walked in on them?”

“Fucking.” The word tasted disgusting in my mouth, but I said it.

The cop tightened his jaw. Scratched his neck. Cleared his throat again. Flashed a half-embarrassed grin. “So where is he now?”

“They went back to her place…it wasn’t last night but the night before. I haven’t seen him since.”

“What’d she look like?”

“Skinny. Old. Bleached-blonde hair that looked bristly… Oh, and it looked like she had a tattoo on her boob.”

The officer shook his head.

“I mean, not to be crude, but I saw her tits.”

“What did this tattoo look like. I mean, in case we need to positively identify her at some point?”

“A rose, but it was faded so it was hard to tell. It could’ve been something else. She had this really dark tan, so the ink from the tattoo didn’t stand out as much as it would’ve if she’d been pale, you know?”

“What about her eyes. Did you catch what color her eyes were?”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, Officer, I wasn’t exactly looking at her *eyes*.” I offered a fake grin. The officer nodded, as if in commensuration.

The campus cop expected me to be nothing more than the typical hormone-fueled automaton with his seed-infusion device always ready to be stirred into arousal by even the scrawniest of bare baby-suckling devices. For the moment, I was willing to match his expectations because it gave me an advantage in the larger game (a game the poor, middlebrow cop didn’t even suspect was afoot).

Sometimes, a god had to lie. When gods lie, it isn’t even lying, really. It’s changing reality itself, by the sheer force of words. Whatever words a god speaks, they must—by definition—be true.

“How tall was she?”

I thought about it. They looked like they were about evenly matched, in the height department. I wondered if she picked him out for that reason. Maybe she liked the idea of having a quiet little Asian as her John.

“Well, again, I mean—with the way I saw her there—it’s hard to say. But I’m guessing she was just about the same size as Arihiro.”

The campus cop took more notes. Flipped through his notepad at the previous notes he just took. Paused for a moment. “So I guess you don’t have an idea of what she was wearing, either.”

“That’s correct, Officer. At the time, she was wearing nothing but skin and a smile.”

“And I guess the same with your roommate, too, eh? No idea what he was wearing the night he went missing?”

“There were clothes tossed around,” I said. “But, no, I don’t remember what they were—except they were shorts and a T-shirt.” I began to get bored with the questioning, and thought it might be fun to play a little game with the cop. “You know, some nights, here along the waterfront, it gets chilly. He might have been wearing his St. Edward’s College sweatshirt, too. If you want, I can check in the closet to see if it’s missing.”

The cop waved me off. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary, just yet. Like I said, this is just a welfare check. We have some idea of where your roommate is. When he comes in, though, have him give his mother a call, okay?”

It took all my divine resources to not break up laughing at the cop’s folly. My lips were pursed tightly to rein in the giggles that oh-so-wanted to escape.

“Are you all right, Mr. Bryce?”

“I’m just thinking of all the shit poor Arihiro’s going to catch from his mom, you know? All the angry Jap-banter I expect to hear going a mile a minute when the two of them finally talk to each other on the phone.”

The cop scratched his neck. “Uh-huh. Well, I suppose I’ll be heading out, then.”

“Have a nice day.”

Then the cop shut the door and his intrusion into my kingdom came to a halt. I went back to my place in front of the closet door. I pondered my next steps. The campus police would begin to make inquiries about the blonde. With luck, they would find her (and, when they did, it would be in circumstances that would lead them to correctly assess her as a figure of ill

repute). Perhaps they were already aware of her as the kind of whore who liked to be hired by college kids. In a town as small as Concord Park (the town closest to the college), she would have been likely to have a reputation.

I realized the cops weren't really looking for information, they were looking for a story—a "just so" story that would make Arihiro's disappearance make sense. "He went off with a whore," was the sort of story their tiny little brains could believe in. They couldn't even imagine the truth—that Arihiro had disappeared not only from classes, but from their entire, dying reality, altogether. They couldn't even imagine that all of the rest of them would soon experience a similar transition.

I heard another knocking sound. Not on our dorm room door, but close by, out in the hallway. I got up off the floor, opened the door and peeked outside. The campus cop was next door talking to one of the lacrosse players.

A little aggressive for just a welfare check. Was he going to work the entire hallway? Would he be coming back in this direction? What, if anything, had the jocks seen and heard over the past few days? I knew I had to be wary of this process. The success of Operation Arihiro depended on a little bit of luck. When they found the blonde hag, and didn't find Arihiro with her, she'd have to handle the questioning poorly. She'd have to get out of sorts, seem upset. Look guilty. Look like a liar. The good news was, she was (probably) a whore. And cops knew whores were guilty already. She had one strike against her.

They'd make up a story to fit the evidence. Arihiro, so far away from home and so socially incompetent, went out to buy some love. Prostie and John went on an extended drug binge afterwards. Arihiro started to get violent. Perhaps this happened when he ran out of money yet insisted on continuing the rutting. The woman, prepared for such eventualities, was armed with a knife. She attacked him in the same way she attacked men twice his size. Instead of merely disabling him, she killed him.

That story would make sense to them. That was the reality they would come to accept.

But to accept that reality, they would need a body, wouldn't they? A body, sliced in just the right way by a little knife (the sort a whore might use for self-defense) and then placed into some remote Dumpster, or tossed into a river or the bay? Perhaps not. I never actually wanted to *kill* Arihiro. I

didn’t want a corpse, I wanted a convert. But what if Arihiro’s body (a creation of the old god’s reality) rejected his new eyes (a creation of my reality)? What then? What if Arihiro refused to convert?

There had been a few rays of hope. Those words he said, the last time I let him speak. “God, god, god, god, god.” Perhaps this was simply the first step in the conversion process. But how long would this take? How long would the police be satisfied by the story I gave them without searching the dorm room? How long would my supply of Stelazine hold out? If I kept giving Arihiro two to four pills a day, not long at all. It would be around three weeks before I could get another refill.

Sedation wasn’t a long-term answer. More talks with the police weren’t the answer. Conversion was the answer, for Arihiro. Apotheosis was the answer, for me. I had taken the first step towards divinity. There were, according to the hierophant, six more to go. Some of these steps would likely be given to me in a letter currently in transit from Indiana. I wished I had the time to wait for it to arrive, but that would take at least two more days. Two more days of Arihiro not going to his classes. Two more days of his mom and physics professor calling campus police. Two more days of talks with the police.

The old god’s creation would fight against me in those two days. The campus cops were chattel, like the sand and the moon and the tide. They would work against me. They would try to prevent my apotheosis.

I could no longer afford to delay. I didn’t have the hierophant’s phone number. But I did have his address. There had to be maps of Indiana in the library. In the worst-case scenario, I could simply drive west until I found Indiana, then drive north or south until I found New Harmony. If Arihiro was willing to convert, he could ride along with me as a disciple. If he was unwilling to convert, I would have to let him pass away into the sort of eternal sleep that only the rest of my Stelazine (taken in one giant dose) could prompt.

I stood watch over him that day. I opened the closet door and did nothing but stand watch over Arihiro as he slept, tossed, and turned. I watched Arihiro and listened for sounds of the campus cop interviewing lacrosse players. I couldn’t make out the conversations. Maybe this was because my ears were starting to evolve into godlike ears. Too sophisticated to hear the chatter of chattel. While standing there looking over Arihiro, I heard whispers. Not from Arihiro. Not from the cop. Not from the hallway.

I believed they were whispers from the gods of other galaxies. Psychic diplomatic cables, welcoming me to the club. “Hail, and well-met, fellow god,” one of them said. (Or perhaps it was “Have we met, fellow god?”; I can’t say for sure. It was still a distant sound. Like the sound of an ocean heard a half mile away). I was certain the whispers would turn into loud chants the moment of my apotheosis. The gods of other galaxies would cheer my overthrow of the tyrant, Christ.

For hours, I heard the whispering. Then it abruptly stopped, its noise replaced by the sound of Arihiro stirring in the closet. Once again, I could hear chattel. Once again, Arihiro was alert. He was mumbling something. I wasn’t about to take off his gag to hear what it was. At least, not yet.

Instead, I removed the duct tape from his ears, so he could hear me. “Do you accept me as your Lord and Savior now?”

He groaned, then started—slowly—to nod.

“Do you see me with your new eyes?”

He nodded again. This time, more quickly.

“Excellent.”

Then I heard the voices once again: the gods of other galaxies. “You belong with us,” they said. “Belong…won’t be long…belong…won’t be long…” The voices faded away once more, and I despaired. But I took joy in knowing they’d be back, and I took joy in knowing I’d made my first disciple. My reality was gaining a foothold, with at least one person. If I could do it with one, I could do it with another.

This called for a ceremony. A commemoration of this moment. A rejoicing. The old god set forth the ritual of baptism in water. In time, the water of this world would be loyal to me—but at the present it was controlled by the old god. Baptism in water would be sacrilege.

Therefore I baptized Arihiro in fire. I knelt down to meet him. (A kind gesture, I thought, a god literally lowering himself to the level of his worshipper.) I grabbed Arihiro’s Bic lighter and brushed his black hair away so I had a space on his forehead. I lit the flame and pressed it to the skin. Hop-frog rolled around on the ground excitedly.

“This may sting a little—but the pain’s not the point. Not now,” I said, “since you’ve come to obey my will. The point is, Arihiro, you need to be marked as mine—forever. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just going to burn you enough to leave a scar. A scar deep enough to never go away. It will be

a way of deputizing my disciples—a way of always reminding you, and the world around you, that you belong to me."

Even over the sound of his whimpers, I could hear his skin sizzle. Smelled it, too. I felt high. I *was* high. I was *god*. When I was through, I turned off the lighter and placed my lips upon his forehead. "There," I said. "Sealed with a holy kiss."

He started to mumble something through his gag. I took a risk when I took it off, but I am a merciful god. I wanted to hear Arihiro's confession of faith. And how was I to hear his testimony if I didn't allow him to speak? I took off the duct tape, took the slobber-soaked underwear out of his mouth. He gulped in mouthfuls of air.

"I worship You, god."

"Yes, you do. And your god is pleased by your worship."

"Please, god. I need…use bathroom."

"But I brought you a piss pot. You can use that."

"I must…defecate."

Defecate? The kind of word taught to those learning English as a second language, but never used by native speakers. The kind of word used by someone who didn't know much in the way of slang (and who overused the one piece of slang—"sucks"—that he did know).

"You mean, you have to shit?"

"I do not wish…to…shit….in front of You."

"I'm not letting you out to use the bathroom. Not yet. If you're seen out in the hallway by the lacrosse players, that will ruin things. You can do it here. Then I'll get rid of it, somehow. Hell, maybe just toss it out the window."

"May I…" He trailed off, unable to articulate exactly what he needed to say. He wriggled his wrists against the duct tape.

"You want out?"

He nodded.

"Well, since you're not wearing a diaper, I suppose that would only make sense. But when you're done, back in your bondage. Deal?"

He nodded quickly. "Yes, god."

I brought over the pitcher I'd offered him before, this time to use as a chamber pot. Then I grabbed a pair of scissors and—gently, so as not to accidentally cut his wrists—released my chattel from his bonds so that he could do his business.

He fell to his knees. “Oh, god,” he gasped. “God, god, god, god, god!” Groveled at my feet. Put a clammy hand on my calf, raised my jean leg, kissed it. Such worship felt pleasant. More than pleasant.

Exquisite.

Then the sensation of something hard clasping onto my calf. Teeth. Clenching down. Grinding.

I yelped. Tottered. Stumbled.

Arihiro may have been butt naked but he didn’t care. He scrambled on all fours past me. He pinballed around the room on his hands and knees. He’d lied to me. His new eyes hadn’t really taken. His old-god-designed body was rejecting them. I suspected this was because he lacked faith.

He’d figured out that I stood between him and the door. Once he crawled past me, it was only a matter of milliseconds before he found it.

He’d betrayed me, first with a kiss. Then with hoarse screams. “Help! My eyes! He’s crazy! Help!”

Then I heard the sound of a dozen dorm rooms opening. A few giggles. Then curse words. Then more shouts from Arihiro. “He took out my eyes! He’s crazy! Greg! Greg!”

Hop-frog rolled around the room, pinballing around in imitation of Arihiro. “Don’t do that!” I hissed. I grabbed him, my car keys, my wallet, Arihiro’s wallet, and the last letter from the hierophant. Both wallets went in my back pockets. The letter went in my front pocket. Hop-frog rested in my hands. He seemed a little nervous. I had to restrain him from rolling out of my grasp while I ran out of the door and down the stairwell.

I went down the stairs two and three at a time. I heard lacrosse players scream. As I reached the bottom landing and flew out the door, I heard heavy footsteps echo through the dank stairwell, pursuing me. A pity I had to flee. The air seemed—for the first time that year—imbued with autumn. I couldn’t enjoy it.

It may seem bewildering that I, a god, had to flee. But I wasn’t a god *yet*. I hadn’t gone through the Sevenfold Path to Godhood. I hadn’t yet had my apotheosis. And, the time for learning how to become a god through correspondence courses had ended. I needed to pay the hierophant a visit, in person.

The First Phone Call

“Mrs. Bryce?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Sergeant Bache of the St. Edward’s County Sheriff’s Department. I’m afraid I need to ask you a few questions.”

A pause. “Questions? Greg? He’s in trouble?”

“Do you know where he is, ma’am?”

“What’s this about? Did he get caught drinking? He never drank here, but I was afraid he’d take it up when he went away from home. Is he okay?”

“Please answer my question, ma’am. Do you know *where he is*?”

“He should be there at the college.”

“He fled from there, ma’am. At this time, your son is a suspect in what would be—at the very least—a serious assault.”

A tremble in the woman’s voice. The sound of quick breaths whipping up the crackle of static on the line. “Greg…he hurt somebody?”

“He’s a suspect in an assault, yes, ma’am. A felony. When’s the last time you spoke to him?”

Sniffles. High-pitched whimpers. “It’s…it’s been a while. He told me not to call him. Said he wouldn’t come home for Thanksgiving if I kept calling him. So I thought, you know, I’d give him some space. And then, well, our other son has his own problems, too. And—”

“So, he was disagreeable the last time you spoke to him?”

“That’s not what I said…is this being taped?”

“Not at this time, ma’am. Although I will be making a written report of our conversation.”

“He’s a sick boy, Officer. That’s all. If he doesn’t take his medicine right, he gets edgy. And I didn’t know assault was a felony. I mean, what did he do, give the other boy a black eye?”

A cough from the officer. “I’m afraid it’s quite a bit more serious than that, ma’am. Your son is suspected of holding his roommate prisoner against his will and maiming him. His roommate is lucky to be alive.”

“The foreign boy?”

“Yes, ma’am. Mr. Takahashi.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t one of those athletes up there? I’ve always worried about Greg and the foreign boy having a room so close to them. There are news stories all the time about hazing.”

“At this time, there are no other suspects.”

“Well, Officer, maybe you should do some investigating and *look* for some other suspects. You’re targeting Greg because he has emotional problems, aren’t you? The same old stereotypes. You should know that not everyone who’s violent has a mental illness.”

“Your son’s mentally ill?”

“You didn’t know that? Yes, he has a mental illness. But that doesn’t automatically mean he’s your suspect. He went to community college up here. Got on the Dean’s List. We were very proud of him. His doctor was very proud of him.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, ma’am, who *is* the doctor?”

“Al-Refai. Here in Elkton.”

“I’ll be needing his number.”

“Why do you want to talk to him?”

“It seems like it would be helpful to the investigation. I would think you’d want to cooperate with us on this. I mean, if it’s demonstrated he’s mentally ill, well—I can’t make any guarantees, mind you—but the court might take that into consideration.”

“I’m not going to answer any more questions for you today, Officer. Not until I’ve gotten a lawyer for my son. It seems that there’s a witch hunt going on down there. Pick on the kid who’s insecure. Don’t you think it’s a little lazy to immediately jump to the conclusion my son did it, just because he’s the roommate? That foreign boy never looked quite right to me. How do you know he didn’t mutilate *himself*?”

“At this time, we’re pursuing this as an assault investigation, ma’am. The state’s attorney may file other charges, as well, due to him holding Mr. Takahashi against his will for so long. You’re within your rights to obtain a lawyer, but we’re only doing our jobs. You see, his car is missing. He’s fled.”

“He’s probably scared. When this all happened, he probably got paranoid.”

“You need to know he’s a suspect. If he calls or visits, you’re to contact your local police department as soon as possible. If you don’t, you may be charged with obstruction of justice or harboring a fugitive.”

“You really don’t get it, do you? My son can’t be guilty of this. People with mental illnesses are more likely to be the *victims* of crime than the perpetrators. He’s just a very shy, sick boy. You just wait until my husband gets home from work. I’m sure he’s going to have a thing or two to say about this, and he’s not as polite as I am.”

“Ma’am, I can understand that you’re upset. I’m simply doing my job.”

“Doing your job? Your job is to find out what happened to the foreign boy! Your job is to *in-ves-ti-gate*. Your job isn’t to target the first person who occurs to you as a suspect. If this is an example of what it’s like when you do your job, then all I have to say is I sure am glad I’m not a taxpayer in St. Edward’s County.”

“Ma’am, that’s not necessary.”

“It *is* necessary. You have to see you’re making an awful lot of assumptions about my boy. Sure, it’s easy to blame this all on him, but is it true? Do you even care what the truth is, or are you just interested in making up whatever story gets this case solved the quickest so you can finish off that plate of donuts in front of you!”

“Ma’am…”

“I can’t take these stories you’re making up about my boy seriously. My son’s too shy to do anything violent. When he gets sick with his mental illness, he keeps to himself, goes out to the middle of nowhere. He gets away from people. Doesn’t want anything to do with them. He’s not violent toward them. He wasn’t raised that way. I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but we’re a good Christian family, Officer. We’re not some St. Edward’s County white trash you can just bully around.”

A sigh. “I’m going to be getting off the phone now, ma’am. Like I said, you need to contact your local police department if he contacts you by phone or by mail, if he shows up at your residence, or if you even think you see him anywhere around your town. I’ll be contacting the authorities up there. An officer from the Cecil County Sheriff’s Department may be contacting you to assist with our investigation.”

“Well, you just listen here. We happen to know half the Cecil County Sheriff’s Department. We go to church with old Sheriff DeWalt and Corporal Anderson was best man at our wedding. So you just go ahead and call them and see what they s—”

Click.

The Exodus

For the first stretch of the trip, I had no map besides the sun.

I distrusted it (because it was the chattel of the old god). For all I knew, the sun wasn't really a sun at all. It was, perhaps, a gigantic searchlight, roving around the planet in circles, shining on all the creatures of the earth to make certain none of us escaped the old god's reality. Maybe that was the trickery involved: there is no "sun," just a cosmic prison guard high in his shack, checking on us. Or maybe the sun wasn't a searchlight; maybe the old god had *repositioned* it, so that it would set in the *east*. He could surely do that, and it would steer me away from my intended destination and right into the arms of my persecutors. Maybe *that* was the trickery involved.

Maybe he'd do that for the sole purpose of preventing my apotheosis. Under the current circumstances, I couldn't become a god unless I learned and completed the remaining tasks in the Sevenfold Path. I couldn't learn the remaining steps unless I talked to the hierophant. The old god could prevent being overthrown by preventing me from reaching New Harmony, Indiana. I am quite certain he'd use all the tools at his disposal to interfere with the fulfilling of my destiny (including using the sun to confuse me). I had to put such reservations aside, though. (In the same way I had to shove aside my concerns that the air in the Honda might not really be air. The same way I had to shove aside any doubts that all of this was unreal; not just the car but also the road, the sky, the hierophant and—hell—even me.)

I didn't like trusting the sun really was in the west, but I had no choice but to act on that assumption.

I drove north and west, up past Leonardtown. Up around Newburg. They actually have Amish around that part of Maryland. I passed some of their buggies. I passed kids carrying other kids in homemade wooden carts. I

liked the remoteness of this stretch of highway. Just Amish and—between vast stretches of Amish farms—rusty, run-down trailer parks.

I did not see any police officers on that stretch of road. At that point, I began to wish that I'd granted Hop-frog at least some scintilla of consciousness so it could act as a watchdog. I wished it could at least whoop or growl whenever it saw a cop car.

The cops would not understand if I told them the truth. The cops were the most perfect example of chattel. They simply did as they were told. They'd been told I was violent, and they would most assuredly believe that. They would look at Arihiro's new eyes and see not transcendence but, rather, mutilation. They would hear Arihiro's testimony against me and believe his words to merit both belief and pity. No amount of explaining could make that right. Their little brains didn't have enough room for my truths.

They would be looking for me, for this car. And if they caught me, they'd throw me away in prison. I shuddered when I considered what they'd do to poor Hop-frog. Tear him apart, probably, the same way Arihiro did. Either that or keep him locked away in a drawer at the police station; keep him locked away as "evidence" of my alleged lunacy. My hand trembled as I petted my creation. It rolled around in the passenger seat, blissfully unaware of the danger we faced.

"I won't let them take you," I said. "Not without a fight."

Did I need weapons? I'd been lucky, as Arihiro still had about three hundred dollars in his wallet even after his binge with the bleached-blonde. I didn't know how much a pistol would cost. What sort of paperwork would I have to fill out? Would there be a waiting period? How big was the manhunt to catch me? If I walked into a gun shop, would the guy inside instantly know I was wanted for the maiming of Arihiro Takahashi? Was it the sort of news Al Sanders would be reporting tonight at 6:00 p.m. on Channel 13? Or was this going to remain a story primarily talked about down in the boondocks of southern Maryland…that dangly little peninsula too far away from Baltimore or Washington for newscasts in either city to care much what happened down there?

I couldn't take chances. I had to assume the worst. I had to assume *everyone* knew. I had to assume *everything* (the sun, the moon, the ground, the very asphalt I traveled over) was spying on me, at the old god's behest. Yet, at the same time, I had no choice but to trust the sun would lead me west. It was a terrible position to be placed in—being forced into a corner in

which you had to take some things for granted even as you had to suspect so many other things were not as they appeared.

How could both be right at the same time?

Somewhere, there, alongside a desolate country road surrounded on either side by tobacco barns, I pulled the car over. My throat was constricted and my face was tight and my teeth were clenched and tears started to wriggle out of my eyeballs like translucent maggots feasting on the grief of a god. All I could do was let them devour it.

There were brown, dried-out places in the ground where tobacco plants had been before they'd been harvested. Thin remnants of stems, a discarded leaf here and there. I walked off the road and lay down in the harvested field. Flies taunted me with their perpetual buzzing. At that moment, I wanted to bury myself in the earth. At that moment, I didn't want the responsibilities of godhood. I didn't want to be on the run.

It was the one point on the trip when I wanted to give up. I considered, for a moment, whether there would be rope in one of those Amish tobacco barns. I considered, for a moment, if one of the barns had a loft, from which an aspiring god could hang himself and be done with it all—be done with this lonely rebellion in which those liberated from the control of the old god offered up not gratitude but disgust. The Arihiros of the world didn't want freedom from the old god. That loathsome Jap probably wanted his old eyes back. Probably yearned to see the world as he had before!

He clung to the old god's illusions even when I gave him a clear alternative. If little Arihiro could fight me in my efforts to enforce a new reality, how could I ever hope to grant the New Vision to the entire world?

A gust swept over the farmland, rustling the stumpy remains of tobacco plants and smacking me in the face. Whistling in my ears. When it abated, I once again heard the mumble of gods from other galaxies. They were louder than when I'd heard them in the dorm room. Perhaps, out here in the middle of nowhere, they felt they could speak more freely. Or perhaps I became more able to hear them with each passing mile westward. Maybe I was *becoming more of a god*, with each mile westward—my senses becoming better attuned to the same frequency of hearing as my brethren elsewhere in the universe.

"Not yet," they seemed to mumble. Yes, *that* was what they were saying. Their voices were not merely louder than they'd been in the dorm room, but also *clearer*. These god-voices from other worlds sounded like wolves and

insects and snakes. “Gods don’t die alone,” they said. “The old god wants you to die here, before the appointed time. Die later, or your death won’t be worth a dime.”

The gods of other galaxies made perfect sense. The old god would want nothing better than for me to end my own life in the dark, pungent squalor of a tobacco barn. The old god wanted me to abort my mission.

I would not let him get the better of me.

I got up off of the ground, brushed my jeans off, and went back to the car.

An Amish man walked out of the tobacco barn, clapped his hands free of dirt, turned around, saw me, and shuddered.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

For a second, I considered telling him the truth. “I am the new god,” I considered saying. “Traveling to New Harmony, Indiana, for my coronation. Kneel before me now, so you might become among the first to find my favor.” But I knew he was one of the old god’s creations and—after my experience with Arihiro—I knew conversion wasn’t that easy. I could’ve spent days trying to convert him. Removing his old eyes—diseased as they were, with the old god’s reality. Giving him new ones. Nursing him through the process. And, even after being as careful as possible, I could still end up without success. I didn’t have the time. I needed to get out to Indiana as soon as possible. So, I dodged his query.

“My identity and my present actions aren’t important, right now,” I said.

He appeared taken aback by this answer. “You need to get off my land.” He spoke in an odd sort of English. It wasn’t exactly like he had an accent, but it sounded forced. It lacked the cadence of English, as ordinarily spoken by native speakers. It wasn’t his language of choice.

“I was just resting.”

“Not on my land, you weren’t. You were trespassing.”

“I’m on my way to Indiana.”

“Fair enough. Then be on your way, please.”

I began to fumble with my car keys, jangling them from one hand across to the other. “I’m following the sun west.”

“Then go. Follow it, while it’s still there to follow. From the look of the sky, doesn’t look like you have long to use it as your guide. Just leave me and my land alone, now. Please.”

How quaint a notion. “His” land. In time, it would be mine.

I looked at my keys, and for the first time noticed how much longer the car key was compared to my post office key or the keys to my parents' house. I began to wonder if, in a pinch, it could do the same trick the corkscrew had done in the dorm room. I didn't want to have to do the same sort of surgery I'd performed on Arihiro, though. If I was going to evade the cops, I needed to get moving. My heart started to pound in my chest. Oh, how I *wanted* to let loose my wrath on this simple fool who dared treat me so condescendingly. Get off his land, eh?

He was pushing it. Part of me thought he probably wanted to egg me on. Maybe he saw through my subterfuge and realized I was the new god. Maybe he was a soldier loyal to the old god's reality, and wanted to pick a fight. Taunt me. Tease me.

Could a god allow such things?

I remembered what the hierophant had written me: the part in his letters about how I was a wrathful god, but also a god not without mercy. He was Amish. Amish were pacifists. Not soldiers. Therefore, not a soldier of the old god's reality?

I decided to err on the side of mercy. I would overlook his insults. I grabbed my car keys and started to walk back to the Honda.

Then that nasty little Amish man just *had* to start muttering to himself in that bastardized German-derived language of his.

The gods of other galaxies whispered in my ear, even more loudly and more clearly than I'd heard them while resting in the field. "Blasphemy," they hissed, "the man blasphemes you! The old god would not tolerate such an insult. The Bible says: '...whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.' Are you just going to stand there and take it?"

So the nasty little gnome of a man decided to mutter his insults in a language I couldn't yet understand, eh? Little did he know the gods of other galaxies had my back.

I might have been a chump back in high school, back when people whispered insults about me all the time. But that was before I'd heard from the hierophant and realized I was soon to become a god.

I placed my car key between two knuckles, so that it seemed to grow out of my hand like a claw. Then I ran. My feet fell on the dry ground like the stampeding hooves of a bull. I let out a scream. The Amish man turned around. Then, together, we danced.

That’s what it seemed like, out there on the farm. I had elbow room out there. Room to grab his throat in my hands and whirl and twirl him around like a partner in a waltz. I imagined the sight—the gorgeous sight—of our silhouettes dancing the dance of justice against the backdrop of miles of farmland and the setting sun. I flung him to the ground and aimed for his eyes, but he deflected my thrust and so the key ended up lodging in a flap of flesh under his chin. Stunned, he muttered more Amish nonsense.

“Blasphemer! You’re in my reality now. Mine, not your old god’s. Mine!” I had my knees on his shoulders, pinning him down. I put one hand over his mouth. I had the other on my jingling keys. “When I take over,” I said, “I will ask humanity to make a covenant with me. And the sign of the covenant will the presence of new eyes—to see beyond the old god’s disguise.”

The Amish man squirmed. I used my car key like a handle, the rest of the keys like a mace and bashed the blasphemer in the head a few times. He whimpered.

“But for blasphemers, there shall be no new covenant. There shall only be blindness. No new eyes at all—just removal of the old ones. An outward and visible sign of your inward and spiritual disgrace!”

And then I went to work in earnest. I don’t think he really knew what was coming, because he panicked *so much* when my car key did its work. First his right eye. Then his left. It was rough work. Unpolished. I didn’t have scissors to snip away all the tendons. Bits and pieces of eye still rested in the socket. The sockets reminded me of birds’ nests. The tiny flecks of bloodstained gel remaining in there reminded me of newly hatched eggs. He squirmed. Of course he squirmed. He was squirming under the gaze of divine justice. He started to choke. He started to shake.

I laughed. Took my hand away from his mouth just long enough to slap him. Laughed some more, then put my hand back over his mouth.

His hands clenched his chest. He choked some more. I took my hand away from his mouth to slap him again. I think he wanted to scream, but all that came out was a gasp. Then he put his hands on his chest again. He trembled some more. Shook like a marionette in the hands of a spastic puppeteer. His mouth foamed. He pissed himself and shit himself and that was the end of it.

The sun was starting to dip below the horizon. The searchlight was off to another continent; off to find would-be escapees. If that image was correct

—if it was the old god's searchlight—then I had managed to avoid getting nabbed. If that image was wrong—if it was indeed merely the beacon to the west—then I perhaps would lose my way.

But how could a god get lost?

"You are on the one, true path," the gods of other galaxies said. "Let the blasphemer serve as an example."

So I left the Amish man out there where he died. As an example to other blasphemers. I went to my car and fetched a piece of my yellow legal pad and a pen. I wrote in big letters, so no one could miss it:

THUS ALWAYS TO BLASPHEMERS

I thought about putting the note underneath the little Amish dude's suspenders, but didn't feel comfortable it'd stay put with the wind gusting around the field. So I managed to tuck it under his body. That was all his corpse was to me: a paperweight. His face wasn't even worth slapping anymore.

I used a stray tobacco leaf to wipe pieces of eye meat off my hands, and then I climbed back into the Honda. As I began to place the key in the ignition, I noticed it was still slathered with the blasphemer's gore. I wiped it off on my pants, started the engine, and drove down the road once again.

I felt much better than I did when I'd pulled over. My encounter with the blasphemer had heightened my resolve. I would keep driving west. I would not panic. The punishment of a blasphemer seemed to grant me greater focus. The sun was slipping away, and I turned on my headlights. I followed the old god's spotlight for as long as I could. I'd never really thought about it, but the sun setting wasn't as big a problem as I'd originally feared. I mean, I'd never really paid attention to it, but it wasn't like the sky went from total light to total darkness. Even after the sun set, there was a bit of its light still lingering, enough for me to follow it. I wasn't in the light or in the dark: I was in the in-between, and that would work for me, just fine.

Driving along the road, I passed another clip-clopping Amish buggy. I wondered if its occupants knew the blasphemer. Part of me felt tempted to steer the Honda right into them, because they were probably blasphemers, too. But that would be reckless. That would be killing.

I wasn't a killer. The Amish guy had died, but I think he gave out from a heart attack. I couldn't get it out of my head—the way he kept bringing his hand to his chest (as if that was going to do any good). It was, I think, the

stress of gazing upon the face of an angry god that killed him; and for that he had no one to blame but himself.

But the police were bound to misunderstand. Just like they were bound to misunderstand what had happened with Arihiro. This seems to be the pattern of things. Before you become a god, you become a criminal.

Hop-frog let out a raspy groan. I looked over at him. “Tired already?”

My stomach started grumbling. I tried to ignore it, as I always did. I was a god. I had only meager nutritional needs to keep this carbon-based farce of flesh animated with my spirit. I could wait. I realized the safest thing for me to do would be to drive until I got out of the Baltimore and Washington areas. I needed to go someplace where the story about Arihiro wouldn’t be blaring out of every TV set. The last bit of Amish farmland faded away, yielding first to a tiny town and then—as I approached the Potomac River—swamp land. A sign told me I was 98 miles from Richmond.

When I arrived there, I would stop for gas. I would get a small bite of something to eat. I would buy a map. I would procure a weapon that suited me better than a car key.

* * *

Deputy Hollister shook Dr. Al-Refai’s hand, then the attorney’s. “I won’t be here long, Doc. Just a few questions to help us out with the investigation. I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Please,” Dr. Al-Refai said, “be seated.” He went to a file cabinet and pulled out a folder, then joined the others around a small conference table.

“Ordinarily,” the lawyer said, “I would advise my client to invoke doctor-patient privilege here, Deputy. I’m sure you can understand that, with this being so early on, there remains a possibility that parties in this case may—perhaps while they’re in an angry, unreasonable mood—unfairly slap a civil suit against my client.”

“So you’re here to make sure he doesn’t put his foot in his mouth.”

“He’s here,” Dr. Al-Refai said, “as a precaution. If policemen had to pay malpractice insurance, you would—perhaps—be more sensitive.”

“All I want to know is where you think he might be.”

Dr. Al-Refai shook his head. “I haven’t seen him in over six weeks, the boy just started college. I have no information about where he would go, in this situation. He was perfectly stable when he was last in my care. I made

certain he had plenty of refills of his medications. Something must have happened to him when he got down there. Something about his routine must have changed. He must not have been taking his medication as prescribed. This is not the patient I last treated." He looked at his lawyer. The lawyer offered the doctor a slight nod.

"Did he ever talk to you about wanting to…injure people?"

"No, he did not."

Hollister took out a notepad and began scribbling into it. "Now, just so we have some idea of what we're up against, Doc, can you please tell me what Mr. Bryce's diagnosis is?"

Al-Refai looked at his lawyer. The lawyer nodded. "Psychotic depression. A disturbance of both mood and his perception of reality. The medications kept that well in check for over a year. I can only assume he stopped taking them."

"Was he ever into drugs, alcohol?"

Al-Refai looked at his lawyer. The lawyer whispered in his ear.

The deputy sighed. "You realize *you're* not the one who's a wanted man, don't you, Doc?"

The lawyer answered. "There was never any mention, on either the patient's part or on any family member's part, of there being a substance abuse disorder."

"Is that all, Deputy? I've had a long day, and I'd like to go home."

The deputy cleared his throat. "Just one more question. Can you verify your patient's height and weight? His driver's license lists him as five-foot-eight, one hundred eighty-five pounds. That sound about right to you?"

Al-Refai glanced inside the folder he'd retrieved from the filing cabinet. "When I weighed him six weeks ago, he was up to two hundred seventeen pounds. The Stelazine—it's known to trigger weight gain. Nasty side effect, but the lesser of two evils, you know?"

"Any distinguishing characteristics?"

"None. I won't go so far as to say he looked normal. Even while medicated, this fellow would look like he had a lot on his mind. He was a serious-minded kid. But he didn't have any tattoos or any of those crazy haircuts some of my patients used to wear five or ten years ago. I mean, he always came in here just wearing jeans, a T-shirt some days—maybe a button-down shirt other days. No scars. Nothing unusual, other than that expression on his face. That preoccupied look."

The lawyer chimed in. “I think that’s enough for now, don’t you, Officer?”

The deputy filed through his notes. “I suppose. I can’t say how Sheriff DeWalt’s going to take it, though, when I tell him the biggest lead I’ve gotten so far is that this kid’s a little chunkier than we’d originally thought.”

The lawyer cleared his throat. “If the sheriff has any more questions, let him know he can have the state’s attorney for St. Edward’s County file a subpoena. Otherwise, I think we’re done.”

* * *

Sergeant Bache offered the campus policeman a cup of coffee. “It seems you were the last person to get a good look at Bryce before he made tracks.”

The campus policeman nodded. He looked just about as miserable as a little boy whose puppy just got run over. “I did. He fed me some phony story about Takahashi going off with a prostitute.”

“Hey, don’t be too hard on yourself. I mean, of course you believed him. It made a hell of a lot more sense than the truth does, you know? I mean, if you had said to Bryce, ‘Open up the closet, I know you have your roommate incapacitated in there, and furthermore, I suspect you may just have plucked his eyes out,’ then you would’ve sounded like you’d belonged in the loony bin right next to him.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“You wanna be a cop when you graduate?”

“My father runs a private security company. I was planning to go into business with him.”

Bache fought the temptation to roll his eyes. No academy, no bustin’ ass on third shift to get a meager promotion to corporal. Just go straight from college to an office right next to Daddy’s. Must be nice. “So, you want to redeem yourself? Help catch Bryce? Give me some information we might be able to use?”

“When I saw him, he was wearing jeans and a dark blue T-shirt.”

“Anything written on the T-shirt? You know, logos, iron-ons?”

“Nothing like that. Just plain blue.”

“Did he look like he was getting ready to move anything? Did you see any packed bags, for example?”

The campus policeman sighed. “I wish I could say yes, but I didn’t.”

Bache paused. Took a sip out of his own coffee. “You look like you have something you want to say, though.”

“Well, by this point this isn’t exactly a news flash…but he was just so… odd. When I entered the room, he was sitting on the floor, leaning up against the closet. He said he was meditating. There were times during my questioning when he looked not-quite-there, you know. Looked like he was going to burst out laughing.”

Bache rubbed his eyes. “He thought it was *funny*? Hrm. We’ll see how much the little bastard laughs when he’s fresh meat in county lockup. I mean, here’s the deal—sooner or later, he’s going to run out of gas or run out of money and need to go running back to Mommy and Daddy. When he does, we’ll nail him.”

“I questioned some of the other guys who live on the same hallway of Winchester with him. One of them said his girlfriend saw Bryce at Calvert Cliffs recently, he was screaming at her. Incoherent. Anyway—I’m not sure if that helps. I mean, there’s no guarantee he’d go back there. But it can’t hurt to poke around and ask if he’s been spotted there.”

“Thanks. I can pass that on to Joe Spendahl in Calvert County. Anything else you learn about Bryce from talking to the people who lived near him?”

“Not really. It’s like he was there, but not there, you know? People saw him, but he never talked to anyone. The Japanese guy never said much, either.”

“At least he had an excuse. I’ve heard his English isn’t great. We finally had to break down and arrange for a translator to take a decent statement from him. And even then, the translation didn’t make much sense. For the longest time, he just kept saying over and over, in Japanese, ‘Greg is god and god is Greg.’”

“Holy shit. You think Bryce, well, brainwashed him?”

“I think I’ll lose my lunch if I start to think too much about what went on between those two. I think all I can do now is work to track down the little psycho. And I think we need to cast our nets north to catch this fish. If he’s gone to Calvert Cliffs, that’s north. If he’s going back to Mommy and Daddy, that’s north. There’s three hours of road between St. Edward’s College and his parents’ house in Cecil County.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of road to cover.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. I prefer to think of it this way: the longer the road, the more chances we have to catch him.”

* * *

Jacob Yoder, bishop for the Mechanicsville settlement, was the third member of the community to look upon the body. The first was the deceased’s wife, Ruth. The second was her full-grown son, Samuel. All three of them gazed at the man without eyes.

Jacob frowned at the sight of the first flies starting to swoop in and out of the sockets. “Have the crows already gotten him? They don’t often work so fast.” He turned to Samuel. “You say he was woodworking this afternoon?”

“Aye,” Samuel said. “He was going to come over this way to grab a saw he’d left behind. This isn’t something anyone here did. We should inform the policemen.”

“Not yet,” Jacob said. “Let me have a look at him first.” The bishop knelt next to the body. Put his hands on the dead man’s jaw and turned his head back and forth, almost as though he were playing with a child’s toy. He examined the body for other wounds, first on the front. He then turned him over. A piece of yellow paper was under the corpse.

Jacob read it. A grave expression overtook his face. He looked up at Samuel, trembling. “I must assemble the other elders. We won’t involve any outsiders yet. No one shall inform the police. This is no concern of theirs. This is the work of either the Lord or the Devil, I am not yet certain which.”

* * *

When I arrived in Richmond (just an hour or two after the thing with the Amish guy), I relaxed. Maybe I didn’t have the right to relax. Maybe cops would be out looking for my blue Honda, looking for my Maryland license plate. Looking for *me*. But I couldn’t stay tense all the time. I had to let myself feel happy, for a change. The evening was still young. It was just about seven p.m. I had no idea how far New Harmony, Indiana, was from Richmond, but I tried to convince myself that if I just kept moving west, I could get there before dawn.

The cops wouldn’t be looking for me there.

The Honda needed gas and my body needed food. So I pulled over into a truck stop. It was a pathetic-looking, grimy building with grimy people filing in and out of it. They had gas pumps, of course. They had a motel there, too, along with a general store and a hole-in-the-wall diner.

I decided to leave Hop-frog in the car, at least for a little while. I'd bring him back some table scraps in a doggy bag. It felt good to stretch my legs again. It was good to find a place that sold maps. There was one entitled "The Mid-Atlantic States," which covered a broad swath of the East Coast. Another was dedicated to just Virginia and West Virginia. They were the kind of big maps you had to unfold to get a good look at them.

I was about to start unfolding the one that included West Virginia (west, always west, until I hit Indiana) when a hand fell on my shoulder.

"You look lost."

I turned around. A guy in his midthirties with a thin, reddish blond beard and even thinner, receding hair stared back at me. He wore jeans, a T-shirt, a jean jacket, and sneakers. A light blue handkerchief was tucked in his rear pocket. He had a little hoop earring in his right ear.

"I'm going to Indiana," I said.

"Long trip ahead of you, but not as long as mine. You're looking at the wrong maps, by the way. What you want is one of them Interstate atlases." He grabbed a thin book from the bottom magazine shelf. Right next to the girly magazines. It was the last one left. He handed it to me. It was published by Triple-A. It showed all the roads in all the states. I started to flip through it. It looked like a good book to have on the journey.

"Thanks a lot for your help." I turned and started toward the counter.

"What part of Indiana you goin' to?"

I craned my neck around (entertaining the idea he might help me with the trip to New Harmony), but thought better of it. I walked back toward the counter.

"Wait! Maybe I could give you some more directions. I mean, it has to be a bummer, traveling all alone, eh? I mean, without a navigator. What I mean is, I know what it's like, and I don't like traveling alone. Sometimes, it's awful nice to have company." He smiled at me. "Don't you think it's awful nice to have company sometimes?"

"I guess."

"Take it from the voice of experience, junior, it sucks to travel to someplace as far as Indiana alone. You've probably never even been there

before, have ya?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Are you even out of high school, junior?”

I sighed, started to jingle my car keys around in my hand, a little nervous-like. “Don’t call me that.” If we’d been out in the middle of nowhere, I would have shown him just who he was dealing with.

He stepped toward me. Lowered his voice. “Say, how old *are* you?”

“What do you mean, how old am I? Why do you care?“

“I’m just a friend, that’s all.” He grabbed the Triple-A atlas out of my hand. “For example, I’m enough of a friend that I’ll pay for this, that way you can save your money. I mean, I’m sure you don’t have an unlimited supply of cash for this trip of yours.” He started to laugh, then sauntered over to the counter.

“I have plenty of money.”

“Think of it as a little kindness, junior. I guess you could say I’m the kind of guy who always feels sorry for little waifs.”

I would have hit him in the face, but he was a bigger dude than Arihiro. Bigger than the Amish guy. I’m not saying I couldn’t have done it, I’m just saying it would’ve been harder. Still, even taking that into consideration, I would have hit him in the face (or even worse) for blasphemy, if it wasn’t for the fact a couple of cops had just walked in.

“You looked like you were about to slap me! Aren’t you quite the spitfire, eh?”

“Look, let me have the atlas.”

“Nope, let me get it for you. I insist.”

I went along with him. He was the lesser of two evils. The police were the ones who actually had the power to deter me from becoming a full-fledged god. The blond man was just a nuisance. We went up to the counter together. The cashier lady looked at us funny.

“Now, Buster, what do you need a Triple-A road atlas for? Don’t you already got one?”

“It’s for my friend.”

The lady behind the counter rolled her eyes. “You and your ‘friends.’”

He smiled. “Maybe your problem is you don’t have enough friends.”

She counted out his change and shoved it back to him, smirking. “Maybe my problem is I have to put up with assholes like you.” She handed the atlas to him.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad. You won’t see me again for another month or two. I’m headin’ out to make a run to St. Louis, and then I’ll be going north from there. Oh, and can I have that in a bag?”

The woman sighed, and did as Buster requested. Then he looked at me and smiled. He was missing teeth, and those remaining were every bit as filthy as the outside of the store. “C’mon, let’s make tracks.”

“Gimme the atlas,” I demanded.

“Let’s you and I talk first.”

I folded my arms across my chest. Bit my lip. Jangled my keys in my hand. “We’ve done enough talking. Give it to me!” I made a move for it. I was able to snag a corner of the plastic bag in my hand. He pulled it back, giggling. “What do you think you’re doing, you fucking spaz?”

One of the cops made eye contact with us. Started walking our way. He had a doughy face, as though his flesh was clay that hadn’t yet been placed in the kiln. It had a molten quality. Unfixed. The flesh seemed to wobble around on his face like a mask that was too big for its wearer.

“Is everything all right over here, gentlemen?”

“Perfectly fine, Officer,” Buster said. “Don’t mind my friend here. He’s just a little tired from being on the road for so long.”

The cop looked at me, then looked at Buster, then looked back at me. He sighed. “If I were you, I would get back on that damned road just as soon as you can.”

Buster smirked. “Yes, sir, Officer.”

The cop opened the door for us with his right hand and pointed to the parking lot with his left. “Now git!”

The loose-flesh cop was an annoyance. If anyone deserved to be blinded, he did. His last name (“Rollins”) was inscribed on a plastic badge on his uniform. I remembered the name, in hopes that one day I would have the opportunity to avenge his insulting treatment. But, on the positive side, he seemed to completely miss the fact that I was on the run. He’d looked right at me. *Held the fucking door open for me!*

I grinned.

“My car’s over here,” I told Buster.

“Hey, I forgot to ask you. You got anything to eat?”

“I’ll probably go back in and get a bite.”

Buster sneered. “Back in there? With that fucking highway patrol pig? Maybe not the smartest idea there, junior.”

I got up in his face. “Fuck off with the ‘junior’ and give me my atlas.”

“What a fucking whiner. You need to get a good, hearty meal in your fucking mouth to keep you from squawkin’. I’ll give you your atlas, but first you need to get somethin’ to eat. I got somethin’ for you to snack on, if you want.”

The gods from other galaxies—those wolf-voices and insect-voices and serpent-voices—started to wail, then moan, then scream, then shriek. Buster said something to me. I saw his lips flap, but couldn’t make out the words over all the god-sounds. Then the night started to melt around me, like the wax of a black candle. The sky (and the stars, and the moon) curled up in a deformed river of molten material. Hot black globs of it rained down on the parking lot, hissing when they landed.

The old god’s reality was coming apart. His hold over reality weakening. Mine, on the other hand, was getting stronger. The gods of other galaxies were my allies as I worked toward overthrowing him. He had to expend energy in guiding the police as they searched for me, which distracted him from the task of maintaining the illusions of reality. He no longer seemed to have the energy to do both. I was winning. But it was not without peril. When the old god’s reality started to break apart around me, I became disoriented. Caught up in vertigo. I had to brace myself against a propane tank outside the store so I wouldn’t fall onto the ground. I covered my ears, the gods of other galaxies were so loud.

Buster took me by the elbow and led me toward his melting tractor-trailer. “Fucking spaz!” he kept on saying. “Fucking, fucked-up spaz.” Then he giggled. With every hyena-like whinny coughed up from his throat, he seemed to lose more teeth. They weren’t breaking apart, though. Like the sky and like his truck, they were melting. Yellow, stained globs of wax trickled out of Buster’s mouth.

He seemed oblivious to the fact that he was as unreal as the sky.

He put the key in the ignition. The cab rattled. I didn’t like this. Hop-frog was back in my car. I would need to show Hop-frog to the hierophant to become a god. What would he say if I showed up in New Harmony, Indiana, empty-handed? The tractor-trailer started to lurch away from the curb. The steering wheel was melting in Buster’s grasp, but he kept on turning it, undeterred. When I tried to grab the door handle, he pushed a button.

The man was trying to lock me in. *Me*. A fucking soon-to-be *god*. I responded by kicking the door. Then the window. Neither budged.

Buster stopped the truck. Grabbed my hair. Pulled it back with his right hand while fetching something from under the driver's seat with his left. The gun was melting like chocolate in his hand. I laughed when he shoved it in my face and part of it smeared off onto my nose.

"That's not the usual reaction I get when I point a pistol in someone's face, you fucking loon. You think I'm not going to use it on you, just because you've got a sweet-lookin' mouth? Is *that* what you think? Well *think again*, spitfire! Use that little loony brain of yours to get it through your skull I don't care how young you are—I'll cap your motherfuckin' ass."

He jammed the pistol in my face, and the barrel started to sag like a flaccid dick. How could I not howl with laughter?

Buster gritted his teeth, grabbed the gun by the flaccid end, and started to whip the handle across my face. I howled. My cheekbone cracked. The gods of other galaxies gasped. I saw black and I saw white and I saw it start to swirl together. Then I heard the revving of an engine, and I felt us move forward.

* * *

When I came to, we were pulling off the interstate and into a town called White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The old god appeared to have used the period of time while I was asleep to stitch the fabric of reality back together. Neither the sky, nor the truck, nor Buster's gun, nor Buster were melting now.

My head didn't feel so hot. My stomach growled. The digestive machinery needed fueling.

"I know just what your problem is," Buster said. "You probably need something to eat."

He pulled the tractor-trailer into a dark, empty grocery store parking lot. The truck rumbled over the cracks and speed bumps on the pavement. He cut off the headlights, grabbed me by the hair, and put my face against his crotch. There was denim. There was a metal zipper. There was his carbon-based seed-infusion device sticking out of it. "Suck it, spitfire. I can tell by the way you sashay that faggot ass of yours it's not your first time."

When Buster’s seed-infusion device wormed its way into my mouth, the gods of other galaxies started crying.

The Passion of Gregory Bryce

It pains me to admit I didn't recognize the new god when He arrived on my doorstep. Perhaps this is because I hadn't expected to meet Him at all. Not, at least, until we had gotten to the final two steps on the Sevenfold Path to Godhood. We were only at step three—and hadn't even completed that, by my reckoning. Or, I may have not recognized Him because His arrival woke me up. He'd knocked on my door at nine a.m. and ever since I was shooed out of church ministry, I've let myself linger in bed until ten. Or, it may have been that He looked so *different* than I'd expected Him to look. His clothes had gone days without washing. The child I'd spied at the bus stop five years ago was clean cut. He'd gotten heavy. The child I'd seen was skinny as a rail. His features had matured a little, but His chubbiness gave Him a cherubic baby face (marred only by swelling and bruising over one cheek). He didn't look nineteen. I knew it was Him, though, because He had one of my letters in His hand when He introduced himself.

"Are you the hierophant?"

I nodded, and began to feel my legs tremble.

"I am the new god," He said. "I didn't have any way to get your phone number, so I just used the return address on your letter to find the place."

I fell to my knees. "My Lord! Forgive me for not recognizing You immediately."

"I…I need to rest."

"Of course, sire. And, it would appear You could benefit from, well…that is…some ice for Your injuries."

"No ice. Just sleep."

"Yes, of course. If You'd like, You can sleep in my bed. I wish I had clean sheets for You, but—alas—I only use one pair. To clean them, I'd have to take them off the bed and You'd be placed in the position of

needing to wait to use them. I wouldn't be able to live with myself, my liege, if I knew I was responsible for delaying Your rest. I can lay down a clean sleeping bag for You in the bed. Please forgive the lack of preparation for Your arrival. It's just I was expecting to next hear from You by mail. B-but d-don't misunderstand me, sire. I am honored You chose to visit Your humble servant. May I ask, m'Lord, if Your creature is here with You? I, I w-would very much like; that is, I would be greatly *honored* if You could allow I, Your humble servant, to gaze upon the creation myself."

The new god brought His hand up to His forehead and ran His fingers through a tangle of unwashed, dark brown hair. "I, I didn't bring him."

I swallowed. "I see. Is it in Your car?"

"I didn't drive all the way out here. I got a ride. My creature…well, *Hop-frog* was his name, he…he got left behind in Richmond."

"But, Lord, if I may be so bold as to point out to You, we will be needing Your creation for—"

The new god grimaced and pushed His way past me and into my living room. "Where's the bed?"

I pointed. "Down the hallway, first door on the right."

I followed the new god, three paces behind, as He staggered toward my bedroom. He collapsed onto my covers and within moments was asleep. I knelt by His side, ran my fingers through His hair, and sang (in a soft, whispering voice) a hymn in His praise.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,
only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
perfect in power, in love and purity.

I grabbed a spare blanket from my linen closet (admittedly tattered, but at least *clean*) and covered Him with it. While He was asleep, I drove into town to buy some more discarded chicken heads from the slaughterhouse. The sudden appearance of the new god at my house startled me. I hadn't planned for this. I needed advice.

* * *

The autumn sun was weak. The air, for the first time since April, had become chilly. The fire in the powdered chalk circle felt good. The eyes of the decapitated chickens stared in that unfocused way dead eyes seem to

stare. When they burned, there was black smoke and gray smoke and a bit of a stench. But the worse of the smoke went away after a half hour or so, and I could live with the smell. If an unpleasant odor was part of the cost of communing with the head of John the Baptist, then it was a small price to pay.

When the worst of the smoke cleared, I ingested the sacred drugs. The last time I'd communed with my predecessor, his head had appeared in a manner like unto a burning bush: in the flames, yet not consumed by them. This time, however, it was as though the physical head wasn't even there. I saw only a face made out of flame. With each Aramaic word coming out of his mouth, there was a gust of heat.

"This is the last you shall see of me. Your student seems very close to finishing His lessons."

"I met Him tonight, for the first time. He just showed up, out of nowhere."

The burning face smiled. "Gods do that. So, this is good news for you. You are indeed very close. At the end of the process. The sixth and seventh steps."

"Well, I'm not entirely certain. You see, He didn't bring His creation. There's no real documentation He completed the fourth and fifth steps, or even the second and third."

"You will need to ask Him about this, after He's had His rest. It is not for nothing that I revealed unto you the Sevenfold Path. Surely, you're not telling me this knowledge has been wasted."

"We were communicating by epistle. I'd told Him about the second and third steps—that He must sicken His creation, then cure it. I was expecting Him to write me back with an account of His progress in these endeavors. I wasn't even expecting the return letter for another day or two, to be truthful. Then He shows up to my house, unannounced, looking much bedraggled."

The fire eyes widened. "This is unusual…the haste with which He seems to want apotheosis. I will warn you, once again, to beware those who seek the prize of godhood without going through all seven of the necessary steps. Shortcuts are the sign of greed, impatience. You may be raising a devil, not a god."

"And yet, you still fade away. With each time you visit me, you grow less substantial. What if Gregory Bryce is a devil. I wouldn't want to be a part

of raising Him. We'd have to fight Him…you and I together, I couldn't just fight Him alone."

"Peace, hierophant! There are ways to deal with devils, just as there are ways to deal with gods. These ways are not as different as you think. As for your role in possibly raising a demon, I will only tell you this: you have no choice. The duty of leading Gregory Bryce through the Sevenfold Path fell to you. You cannot shirk it now. I see inside your heart of hearts, hierophant, and know you don't want to shirk it. Not really. I know what makes you tick, you see. You seek vicarious glory. That's the character flaw of all of us holy men. We are unable to achieve it in our own right, and so we seek it out in the service of a deity. The men of your time and place took all that away when they defrocked you. You were no longer welcome in the old god's service. And so, for a man like you, what choice is there other than to seek out a new god? To *create* a new god where once there only stood a man, and to worship Him? If you raise a devil rather than a god, I tremble for our world…but I rejoice *for you* because you will finally have someone inviting you into His service, rather than shunning you from it."

"You make it sound so easy to serve a devil! What would you know of such things? If I'm raising a devil, doesn't that make me every bit as monstrous as He is?"

"You speak prematurely, hierophant. You must first clarify your student's manner of proceeding along the Sevenfold Path. Let Him rest during the day, then prepare a meal for Him."

"But that makes no sense. What need has He of food?"

"He will have gone quite a long time without it, and even those on the path to godhood need to keep their flesh-vessel afloat. Make Him a meal. Talk with Him. Find out how far He has truly proceeded down the Path, and then lead Him the rest of the way. You overcomplicate things, hierophant. If you simply stopped worrying and did what fate has called on you to do, you wouldn't need to summon me. Now go, let me be. I grow weary of interacting with this plane of existence. Too many years. Let my spirit go."

I hung my head and meditated, letting the vision slip from me. It was a painful thing—letting John go and then coming to, there on my isolated property on the outskirts of New Harmony. A man such as I wants and needs visions. It's a steep fall—going from talking to a famous man from the Bible to awakening on a dull, cloudy autumn day in southern Indiana. I encouraged myself with the knowledge that the young man asleep in my

bed wasn’t a man at all. Whether He be devil or god, one thing was certain: He was transcendent.

I spent the rest of the afternoon preparing for supper.

* * *

I woke up to the sight of darkness outside my window and the smell of cooking meat. My bones ached. I got up and talked to the hierophant. “I need to brush my teeth. I need to use mouthwash.”

He wobbled over to the bathroom and started looking into his medicine cabinet. “Here’s a fresh brush, sire. The toothpaste is on the sink, right next to the mouthwash and Dixie Cups.”

I nodded. Brushed my teeth three times. Rinsed my mouth out six or seven times. Just to get that taste out. When I looked in the mirror, I noticed my face was starting to lose its opacity. Light was starting to seep through my skin in radiant twinkles. When the glow hit my eyes, they reflected a crystalline spectrum of colors.

My flesh was starting to slip away. “Slip away,” the gods of other galaxies mumbled. (Or, maybe, they said “Lips will sway,” I can’t be one hundred percent certain.) What I saw and what I heard made me smile. My body may have been bruised and defiled by Buster, but isn’t that the way of things? Hadn’t Christ been humiliated right before his apotheosis?

Everything would be okay.

When I was through tending to my teeth, I went out to the kitchen.

“While You were sleeping, I went to the store and got us some lamb. You like lamb?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had it.”

“I think You’ll like it. I’m afraid all I have for a side dish is baked potatoes. Is that to Your liking, m’Lord?”

I wasn’t crazy about them, but I knew if I told the hierophant, it would drive him into a tizzy. So I nodded and said I didn’t mind it.

“And here’s some wine to go along with it.”

When the hierophant took out the corkscrew, I couldn’t help but think about the traitor, Arihiro. He who led me to believe I was being worshiped, when in fact I was being betrayed. A bitterness ricocheted through my mind, and I could feel the glow behind my face intensifying. When I

became a full-fledged god, Takahashi would be among the first to pay for his sins.

The cork opened with a pop, and the red wine flowed into the glasses. “Red zinfandel,” the hierophant said. “I don’t know a lot about wine, but I suppose it goes well enough with lamb. I mean, I know technically You’re underage and all, but I suspect this isn’t the first time You’ll have imbibed a little drink. Moreover, such prohibitions are meaningless to one such as You, sire, eh?”

“I’ve drank before. But I’m not here to get drunk. I’m here to finish the process. If you don’t mind me being blunt, we really almost don’t have time for dinner. I need to get made into a god, as soon as possible. You see, the old god knows about the rebellion. He has his minions out looking for me.”

“Looking for You?”

“They want to stop my apotheosis. It’s your job to tell me how to become a god.”

“Yes, sire, and…if You’ll recall…that’s what I’ve been doing. Now, who’s looking for You?”

“Police.”

“Where did You last see them.”

“Well…back in Virginia. But back there the cops didn’t know it was *me*, you see. It’s in Maryland, mostly, that they’ll be looking for me. Unless they’re looking for my car and find it at the truck stop. That’s where my Hop-frog is, too.”

The hierophant sighed. “If I may be so bold, sire, this troubles me. Did You even get my last letter?”

“I was waiting for it when I had to leave.”

“Had to leave?”

There was no time to explain it all to him. “There was a problem…I made the mistake of trying to convert my roommate to my side. I thought he had actually been converted. Then he denied me, betrayed me. Told the police things. And because the cops are mired in the old god’s reality, they have no choice but to believe him. I was reaching out to him with mercy, you see. But the only ways the old god’s minions know how to respond to my mercy is to lash out at me. To confine and punish me!”

“I…well, I see.” He took a nibble of lamb and a quaff of wine. “So, I can understand Your urgency now.”

“You told me the first step, and I did that. I need to know the other six, and I need to know them now.”

The hierophant coughed. Wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Well, right now, there’s a letter in Your mailbox telling You what the second and third steps are. I mean, it’s either there in Your mailbox or it’ll get there tomorrow.”

“That won’t help me. Just tell me.”

The hierophant got up from the table. “I’ll do better than tell You, my liege, I’ll show You the notes I took after I received the message about the Sevenfold Path.” He went down the hallway and retrieved a stained, wrinkled sheet of notebook paper littered with ink scrawling. He’d been in a hurry when he’d written it. He’d not intended it for my eyes, but ended up passing it over for me to look at.

I held the paper in my hand and, finally, read all the steps of the Sevenfold Path at once:

I. USING ONLY YOUR MIND, MAKE A MAN
II. & III. YOU MUST SICKEN, THEN CURE, YOUR CREATURE
IV & V. YOU MUST KILL, THEN RESURRECT, YOUR CREATURE
VI & VII: *YOU*, YOURSELF, MUST DIE AND BE RESURRECTED

My hands trembled as I read the words. This was good news, indeed. In the end, Arihiro’s violence against Hop-frog would turn out to be a blessing, not a curse. For, by killing my creature, he forced me to resurrect him. And by resurrecting the creature, I had rushed ahead and completed the fifth step on the Sevenfold Path. I had jumped ahead! I told all of this to the hierophant.

He stretched. Bit his lip. “Your haste, m’Lord. It troubles me. It would have been better if You’d brought the creature with You and to proceed from—”

I pushed away from the table, grabbed the corkscrew, walked over to the hierophant and brandished it right in his face. “Are you telling me what I should’ve done, little man?”

He quaked. Fell prostrate on the floor. “N-no, m’liege. It’s just that…”

I put my shoe on his head, placed some of my weight on it, and said, “It’s just *what*, heirophant?”

“I-it’s just not what I had expected. It’s all happening so much *differently* than I’d thought. Forgive me, please.”

“I’ll forgive you when you help me with steps six and seven.”

“You are quite certain, sire?”

I swished my tongue around my mouth. That taste…the taste of…everything that happened with Buster….couldn’t get it out of my mouth. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

“Very well, sire. I’ll assist You. I suppose my fate will allow me nothing else but to assist You with these final steps.” His face took on this tight, hurt-looking grimace and he started to sob.

“I know, hierophant. You’re going to miss me. But I’m not going away for good. You know that. It’s just a change, not true death.”

“I’m Your servant,” the hierophant said. “I want to serve. I want to be a good follower. But I’m scared for You, sire.”

I took my foot away from his head. “You may rise, hierophant. I trust in your sincerity. You’re not like the boy I shared a room with at the college. You are a true believer.”

Now the hierophant was getting up off the floor and blubbering. “H-h-have I ever been anything else, sire? When I went out and about looking for a new god, and I first cast a glance at You…it was like…well…it was like I had found my life’s work. You were only fourteen then, sire. I had to wait for five long years before I revealed myself to You. When I couldn’t watch over You, I hired someone to do it for me. You have to understand. This is the end of…well…quite a long journey for me.”

“Endings…there are no endings here, hierophant. You should know that. I am without end. For both of us, this is just the beginning.”

He wiped the tears from his face, sniffled. “Then we should get started. Let me fetch the materials.”

He abandoned the dinner table and went out onto the porch, rummaging through a toolbox. He took out a couple of six-inch-long nails and kissed them. He stood up and placed one of the nails adjacent to my wrist, getting a sense—I guess—of how deep into the wood he could drive it. “Should work,” he said.

“That’s not going to hold my weight.”

The hierophant nodded. “You are, of course, correct, sire. I’ll use rope to actually *fasten* You to the cross. The nails are there for symbolic value. But in this kind of business, symbols aren’t frivolous. This will be a sign to

show the old god that You're able to take just as much pain—if not more—as he was able to take."

I nodded, then looked up. I heard the gods of other galaxies cheering me on. "Out-die the old god," they chanted in their alien-animal voices. "Out-fly the old god!"

The hierophant fetched a pile of rope and hung it around one shoulder. He carried the hammer and nails with him, in his hands, and walked outside. I followed him, carrying the ladder into the chill night air. Crickets chirped. The light from inside the house poked out of its windows, stabbing the night here and there but never making much of a wound. The light shining from underneath my face dimmed, then extinguished entirely. After a minute of walking, I was immersed in the darkness. On my own, I couldn't have found my way. The hierophant guided me. Led the way toward my own personal Golgotha.

I'd noticed the cross off in the distance when Buster had dropped me off in front of the hierophant's farmhouse earlier that day, but I hadn't thought much of it. Such monuments to the old god dotted the landscape out here. There were probably half a dozen of them in the New Harmony area, alone. Now, I saw only the bottom of it. The little bit I could see looked a lot like a telephone pole. The rest was obscured by the darkness. Clouds blindfolded the moon and stars.

In darkness, the earth and the sky seemed not so different from each other. There on the hierophant's lawn, I lost my bearings—could no longer tell up from down. Up was dark. Down was dark. The darkness felt round. I dropped the ladder. It felt like a cocoon was growing around me. A gust of wind slapped my cheek and a black residue of night stuck there, like tar. I felt the radiance under my face stir once more in an attempt to burn away the blackness of night, only to have more night slather itself over top of me. Over my face. Over my body. Into my orifices. I tried to scream, but ended up only choking.

The hierophant rushed up to me. Started yapping at me like a frightened dog. I couldn't hear what he was saying…not with the molten night clogging my ears. I could only hear the gods of other galaxies (who were, I supposed, strong enough to be heard even under such circumstances) mumble reassurance: "Cocoon—god soon. Cocoon—god soon."

Then the thick black ooze of night worked its way into my eyes. No seeing. No hearing. I couldn't understand. The whole point of apotheosis

was to make me into a *god*—not into a blind, deaf, mute. I calmed down by reminding myself this wasn't godhood, it was just a transitional stage en route to godhood. The gods of other galaxies even told me so.

"Cocoon—god soon…Cocoon—god soon…"

I sensed myself moving forward. I had no tactile sensation, but my muscles still had a sense they were moving. I sensed myself climbing steps. A ladder? A ladder up the cross? The muscles in my arms had a sense of moving backward, stretching out. Wide. Then a pummeling. The night-cocoon had covered my skin to such an extent that I didn't feel the nails' piercing, but my muscles—inside—felt their pummeling. First on my left wrist, then the right. Then on both ankles.

It hurt, but not as much as one would think. It made perfect sense. The cocoon was there to protect me, to insulate me from the worst of the pain. All gods must have been born this way. It had to be the only way they could endure the pain of apotheosis. The cocoon was all just part of the process.

There on the cross, I had a sensation of floating in the inky, oozing night. Of flying. "Die, god," the gods of other galaxies sang. "Fly, god."

I wanted nothing more than to die, but it seemed to be taking a long time. I started to fall asleep. In my naïveté, I thought *that* was dying. I invited it. Yes, night, I thought. Take me. Make me hibernate until I reawaken, glorified.

Perhaps I even *did* sleep, up there on that cross. Slept, that is, until the cocoon of night was pierced. It started at my feet. At first, it was an almost-cozy warmth, but that only lasted for a few seconds before it was replaced by the stinging soreness of burning.

I wanted to scream, but the part of the cocoon around my face still lingered there. The cocoon was dissolving, bottom up. It was turning to ash. It was only a matter of moments before swaths of the cocoon were torn away from my belly and my shoulders. Then, finally—unmercifully—from my chin, my cheeks, my nose, my eyes.

Then, only then, did I see and smell the surrounding flames. I glared down at the hierophant bastard, looked him in his beady little eyes as they glowed with the reflection of fire. While I was snoozing in my cocoon, he'd gathered kindling and set it ablaze at the foot of the cross.

When the fire finally reached my mouth, the cocoon of night shriveled and fell away. I screamed at him with blistered lips. "Why?!"

“I’m not certain,” the hierophant hollered, “if You are the new god or the new devil. On the one hand, Your insistence to rush through the Sevenfold Path makes perfect sense. On the other hand, I’ve been warned that such insistence only lingers in the diabolical heart. I didn’t know whether to crucify You or burn You at the stake. So, to be on the safe side, I’m doing both.”

* * *

Yes, it’s true, I burned Gregory Bryce after I crucified Him. Like the old god before Him, He asked why. Unlike the old god before Him, He got an answer—an answer I delivered as calmly as I could. He needed to know. Yes, in retrospect, I’m sure He may have found it disheartening that—up to that very moment—I was uncertain of just who He was. That’s *my* cross to bear.

To be sure, I had some concerns about my methods. The people around here are mostly the simple kind of folks who would just shrug if they saw a cross burning in the distance. They aren’t the kind of folks to call the cops over something like that. But there are, as I may have mentioned, no small number of would-be hippie philosophers out in these parts, and I suppose I was slightly worried they would mistake my ceremony for Ku Klux Klan activity. Lucky for me: with the right wood, a burning cross only looks like a burning cross for the first hour or two. After that, it just looks like a big bonfire. If anyone in town saw it from off in the distance, they probably assumed I was having some sort of autumn celebration.

Did I tremble while burning my Lord? Of course I did. There is a difference between merely *reading* the steps of the Sevenfold Path and actually watching them come to completion. Even my experience burning chicken heads hadn’t prepared me for the unique stench of human flesh meeting flame. I suppose, even if you brace yourself for it, there’s nothing that can really prepare you for *that*. I’m not a ghoul—it’s not that I was totally unaffected by what I was doing; but John the Baptist had been *quite* clear about exactly what one must do to walk the Sevenfold Path.

So I didn’t freak out. I kept calm enough to finish what I’d started.

I poured charcoal on the base, threw a bunch of lighter fluid into the mix. He was no longer a slender boy, so I had to constantly replace the fuel on the fire, so that the flames could consume Him. The whole thing took about

six hours. I had enough supplies on hand to keep the fire burning nice and hot all through that time. For hours, I sat there in front of the flames, trying —the entire time—to find some trace of John the Baptist inside of them.

But he wasn't there.

Then, round about two in the morning, I got out a hoe, climbed the ladder, and poked at my Lord's remains. They started to fall apart. He was now just chips of bone and ash. When I prodded at His skull, it fissured with orange embers, then collapsed in a wisp of flame. When I prodded at His chest, it imploded and the entire charred cross fell down into the fire.

I had to fight the urge to throw myself on the pyre with Him, like some Hindu widow engaged in the ancient rite of suttee. But if I committed such an act, my ashes and bone would be mixed together with those of my Lord. I didn't feel myself worthy of such an honor.

So I took out a fire extinguisher and did my best to douse the flames. It wasn't as easy as they make it look like on TV. For one thing, my little handheld extinguisher didn't kill the whole fire. It made a big dent though. When the fire got small enough, I smothered it under a musty old horse blanket I'd found in the barn. It took a while to extinguish it, and even as the eastern sky started to glow with the coming dawn, it wasn't totally out. Flame still poked out, here and there. The ground still smoldered.

I went inside my house to the kitchen and retrieved salad tongs from a drawer. There were a few places under the cross that had cooled down enough to walk on. I stood there and looked for bits of His bones, then collected them with the tongs and set them aside to cool. Many of the fragments turned to dust during the collection process, but some didn't. After about twenty minutes, I'd picked up as many of the fragments as I could. There was a residue of His dust on the ground. I went inside and fetched the envelope His most recent letter had come in. I took the letter out, went outside, and positioned the envelope onto the ground in such a way as I could blow some of His ashes into it. Some of them made it in there. Some of them blew off into a gust of wind. I tried to collect as many relics as possible. But I could only do so much.

I went back inside and hammered the bits of bone into pulp, and placed them in a mason jar. I poured the ash from the envelope in, too. Then I drove out to the labyrinth. The coolness of that autumn morning felt fresh. Dew still lingered on the plants that made up the labyrinth walls. I poured the new god's dust out of the mason jar and into my palm, then scattered

His ashes a little at a time as I tread the labyrinth. It felt like the right thing to do. I felt like a farmer scattering seed.

When I made it through the winding paths and reached the end point in the middle, I entered the cabin of contemplation, put the mason jar down and prayed. I was glad that I'd both crucified and burned Him. I'd covered all my bases. But if He was a devil and not a god, had I committed an act of black magick by scouring His dust over the labyrinth? Had I just reconsecrated this labyrinth to evil? Had *I* become evil?

As if to answer the question, there was a knock on the door. A moment after the knock, a man entered, wearing the blue and gray uniform of the New Harmony, Indiana, town marshal. It was old John Robb.

"Pardon me, Reverend…but I've had a call from, well, Maryland State Police. They want me to ask you some questions about a kid back east who's gone missin'."

The Last Phone Call

“Mrs. Bryce?”

“I thought I told you that I’m not speaking to you unless I have my attorney present.”

“I’m not calling to ask you questions, ma’am. I’m calling to update you about the status of our investigation.”

“You found Greg?”

“No, ma’am. I’m afraid not. But his car was found by Virginia State Police, at a truck stop.”

“So are you going to apologize for accusing me of harboring him?”

“Ma’am, that’s not what this is about…”

“What, you don’t think we *deserve* an apology?

“Ma’am…ma’am just let me finish. We have concerns that your son may have met with foul play in Richmond.”

“Oh, God. Oh, Lord. No!”

“Ma’am…please…I want to tell you about this but I need you to work with me here.”

In the background, the woman’s husband speaks. “What’s wrong, hon?”

“It’s Greg. They think someone in Virginia hurt him.”

“Ma’am…we’re not one hundred percent sure, but I need to update you about the investigation. He was last seen in the company of a truck driver with a record of several past assaults. Virginia State Police have sent out an APB to be on the lookout for him.”

“Assaults?

“R-rapes, ma’am. Against younger men. In some cases, minors.”

She starts to speak and her voice cracks halfway through the first syllable. “You see! I told you he was more likely to be the victim of a crime than the perpetrator! You scared him. You scared him until he ran away and

you scared him so much he couldn't think straight and he…" The cracks in the woman's voice grow into outright breaks. She's crying, but screaming through the tears—as though grimly resolved that no amount of grief will overcome her anger. She's screaming because she has cried enough—over Greg, over Daniel, over mental illness, over mental retardation, over her own apparently diseased womb, which was incapable of sprouting anything other than a deficient child. She's screaming because she doesn't deserve any of this. Because God, it seems, has forsaken her.

"Ma'am…I want to tell you more, but if you continue to be upset like this, I'm going to have to wait. Can you put your husband on the phone?"

Sniffles. A few sobs. Then a clearing of throat. Heightened resolve. "No…no I won't put him on the phone. I can handle this conversation quite well on my own, thank you very much!"

"Very well, then. We have a few more leads and have procured a search warrant to look through your son's post office box. He seemed to have been in communication with a religious fanatic in Indiana."

"Religious fanatic?"

"Well, that's putting it mildly, ma'am. A nutcase, truth be told…with some very strange notions about your son. We think he may have been heading west to seek refuge with this man when he ran afoul of the truck driver. After conferring with the local authorities, it seems pretty clear that your boy never made it out there. No one saw him come into town. No one saw him leave. There's no trace of him there."

"So, we think he's with the truck driver?"

"Ma'am, we honestly don't know. That would be the best-case scenario: that your son is still alive and riding along with the driver on some highway out there. Right now, Virginia State Police are attempting to get a hold of the trucking company, to find out where this fella is going to be dropping off his load."

"Maybe he's the one who hurt the foreign boy, too."

A sigh. "No, ma'am. That doesn't make any sense. We have no evidence of the driver having been in southern Maryland at the time of the assault. Your son is still the suspect in the attack on Mr. Takahashi."

"But…I don't understand. This should prove that he's not the perpetrator of a crime. He's the victim!"

Another sigh. "Ma'am…it's more complicated than that. You want me to make things neat and tidy, to say he falls on one side of the fence or

another. It ain’t that simple sometimes. We’re still at the early stages of trying to reconstruct what happened here, but what we do know is this isn’t your typical assault case. *Nothing’s* going to be simple about the way this shakes out. I don’t think it’s an either/or kind of thing. Your son isn’t *just* the perpetrator of a crime or *just* the victim. He’s both.”

Enthroned

Wanna hear a joke?

“What’s the difference between a god and a devil?”

“About two thousand years.”

Rim shot.

Who said that a god couldn’t have a sense of humor? Who said that a punch line couldn’t communicate an epiphany?

The little nugget of edification inside that joke is, of course, that “devil” is just the name given to a recently dethroned god. There is no *essential* difference between the two. Yes, heaven operates in much the same way as a banana republic. You denounce your predecessor and condemn him to infamy.

Take the Christian devil, for example. Beelzebub. Before he was the Christian devil, he was a Philistine god. Ba’al Zebub.

Devils are simply defeated gods. Gods are nothing more than future devils. It doesn’t matter if a transcendent force is considered benevolent or malevolent. All that matters is the *transcendence*.

The hierophant did well to both burn and crucify me. The hierophant is a wise man.

* * *

When my spirit initially arose out of the labyrinth and into heaven, I finally had a chance to see my great adversary, Christ. He was manifested before my eyes as a hunched-over, arthritic shadow. In a trembling, half-coherent voice, he tried to bargain with me. Had I not been aware of all the efforts he’d taken against me, I would’ve pitied him.

He’d used up all his energy trying to prevent my apotheosis, and that had failed. He knew it was futile to keep fighting me, so he tried to negotiate terms of surrender. His words were halting and slurred and twisted; only slightly clearer than the moans Daniel tried to make. “I g-g-give up,” he stammered. “H-h-have m-m-mercy.” He mumbled something about realizing the whole Cold War thing was a mistake. He said he’d already arranged things so that the Berlin Wall would soon fall. He said the Soviet Union would dissolve, as well. He wanted to make things right. He was concerned about his legacy.

I enjoyed a hearty laugh at his expense. For a moment, I considered keeping him on as my court jester. But that would have been cruel. And I am a god of mercy. So I lifted the sword of righteousness that lay, unused by his side (he’d grown too insubstantial to wield it). I picked it up and brandished it.

“Kneel,” I commanded him.

The Shadow-Christ whimpered and tried to flee. I sighed. I couldn’t have that. I didn’t want to stab him in the back, you see, but he gave me no choice. I thrust the sword of righteousness forward. It sliced through the Shadow-Christ, and slew him. I sliced him. Dissected him. Eviscerated him. By the time I was finished, there were just tiny shreds of shadow littering the throne room of heaven. Tiny bits of him scattered around, just like when Arihiro had torn apart Hop-frog.

Finally, the entire galaxy was mine to command.

I decided against destroying Earth entirely and rebuilding from scratch. I would, instead, twist the former god’s world. Redecorate it until no one would recognize that it had been anything other than my own. I began to melt the polar ice caps. That was the most efficient way to make new water. Better water. Water that would be loyal only to me.

The melting of the ice caps would take decades, so to entertain myself I created a whole other realm of existence. The digital world, cyberspace, whatever you want to call it. Instead of *eliminating* human consciousness, I would *trap it* among pixels. Trap it inside a world that surpassed the old god’s wildest imaginings and mocked any previous notion of “world without end.”

I created it, and it was good.

The Commonwealth of Virginia charged Buster the Truck Driver with my disappearance but ultimately let him go due to lack of evidence. However, it

turns out that his employment with a cross-country trucking concern violated the terms of his parole. Thus, he ended up in prison anyway.

I saw to it that Trooper Rollins of the Virginia State Police came down with a bad case of herpes (contracted when he finally gave in to his urges to explore his own yearnings for the sort of ecstasy highway rest stops could offer). Certainly, I'd whispered various temptations in his ear to help that process along…encouraged him along the way. But I didn't put the urge into his brain cells. The old god had done that when he'd made him. All I did was let the desire loose.

The hierophant was another suspect in my disappearance, but—again—without any trace of a body there was no way to convict him. Moreover, all his lawyers had to do was point to Buster the Truck Driver's previous convictions and—in the blink of an eye—the jury had reasonable doubt. (Although, if he'd really needed my intervention, I would have provided it. He was always loyal to me. I am a just god. I repay loyalty.)

I wanted him to be the foundation upon which I'd build my church. But he didn't seem too eager to spread the word. From my high perch in the throne room, I looked in on him. He seldom left the house anymore. He would pray to me. I'd speak to him. I'd tell him to spread the word. He said he feared coming out in support of my deity, for fear of the repercussions. He said the old god's minions would fight him. Destroy him.

So I sent him help.

It made sense. I couldn't start with just one adherent. I'd need two (maybe three). The first one I convinced to join him was Bishop Jacob Yoder. The Amish almost never left their communities. I'm not certain an Amish *bishop* had *ever* left.

But with god, all things are possible. I told him where the hierophant lived. When he found the farmer's body, he'd wondered whether it was an act of god or the devil. I encouraged that line of questioning—whipped it up into a fervor. He grew restless. He had to know more. He left the confines of his community.

The hierophant greeted him warmly. He'd grown lonely. They lived together in the farmhouse in New Harmony for months. The hierophant told the bishop what he knew of me. The bishop became convinced he needed to start a new community focused on my worship.

All of this was a good start, but it was missing something. Both the hierophant and the Amish bishop knew a little about my ministry on Earth,

but neither of them knew about my unique sign of baptism.

Neither of them knew about the sign of the covenant.

Arihiro did.

Yes, Arihiro had denied my divinity, but St. Peter had denied Christ's *three times*. If the old god could redeem his denier, then I should be able to as well. So I found him. He was in a long-term psychiatric group home in St. Edward's County. He'd started to believe in me again. Begged for the staff to put seashells under his eyelids so that he might see my reality. Some doctors said this was post-traumatic stress disorder. Others said it was psychosis. But they all were in agreement he wasn't a well man. He didn't help matters by caving in to depression. The guilt of having denied me weighed too heavily on his heart. He'd had three unsuccessful suicide attempts.

He wasn't meant to die. I had a plan for him.

I began talking to him. I whispered to him the secrets of where the staff kept keys. I helped guide him on his way out. I guided him to New Harmony. Kept him safe from harm while he hitchhiked out there.

What a joyous day it was when he arrived at the farmhouse! He gave the first sermon in the history of my church. He told the hierophant and the Amish bishop about *my* baptism—the scorched forehead—and *my* covenant—the new eyes.

They both submitted to the rituals and have, in turn, passed on the message to others. There is now a community of nearly a dozen followers living together in the farmhouse, under the authority of the hierophant. He blinds them and burns them and gives them new eyes as they trickle in from places like Evansville and St. Louis. They don't have easy access to seashells in New Harmony, so they use rocks or clods of dirt instead. I'm not so rigid a god that this offends me. As the movement grows, certain adaptations may be necessary. And the movement will continue to grow. I see that the first followers from New York and Chicago are already on their way.

My followers do things you might consider—at first blush—to be hideous. But you should ask yourself, are they really more objectionable than, say, circumcision? Were the Crusades or the Inquisition any more humane?

Some of you will call me a racist, for things I said and did to Arihiro. But was not the Holy Bible quoted in support of slavery? Does not my elevation

of Arihiro to a substantial role in my church cancel out any ill treatment I may have inflicted on him before he learned obedience? I admit I have done things you might consider hideous, but these are the sorts of things gods *must* do. If you look at the matter fairly, you must conclude that I am no worse than any other god you have ever known.

You've spent time with me. I've talked to you. I am talking to you this very moment. Surrender your soul to me. You've given me space in your brain as you've read about my life and times, now I only ask that you give me a place in your heart. What are the alternatives? To believe in no god at all? That defies human nature. Knees exist so that one might kneel. Necks exist so that heads might bow. The notion of god is hardwired into the human genome. There's no escaping it.

What's the alternative? To believe in the old, dead god? The empty pews in a typical church on Sunday morning should provide sufficient demonstration of the silliness of *that*. The opinion polls show that belief in him quite justifiably dwindles each day. No, there is only one sane course of action.

Join the others in New Harmony. Take on my baptism. Take on the sign of the new covenant. Look at the world with new eyes. *My* reality. Not the old god's. Mine.

Believe.

About the Author

Nicole Cushing is the author of the acclaimed novella *Children of No One* (DarkFuse, 2013) and over twenty short stories published in the U.S. and UK. Her previous work has drawn praise from Thomas Ligotti, Gary A. Braunbeck, John Skipp, *Black Static* and *Famous Monsters of Filmland.* She lives with her husband in Indiana.

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